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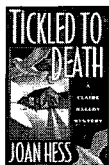
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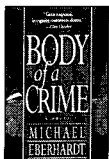


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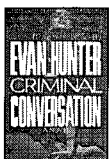
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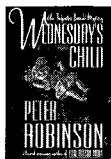
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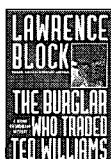
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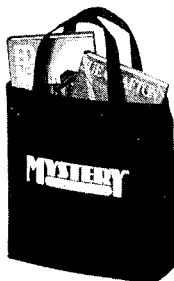
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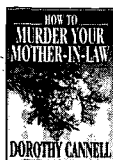
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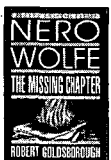
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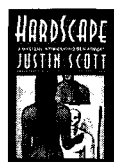
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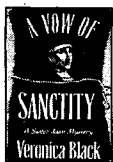
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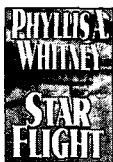
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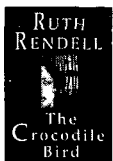
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CONTENTS



SHORT STORIES

DEAD FLOWERS by Ashley Curtis	10
A KNOWLEDGE OF POISONS by Gregor Robinson	32
THE SIXTH MAN by Edward D. Hoch	44
DEAD IN HIS OWN BACK YARD by Robert Halsted	59
EENSIE-WEENSIE SPIDER by Sybil Baker	70
THE WITCH AND THE CURSE ON BLACK DAN HARRINGTON by Angela Zeman	94
UNNATURAL CAUSES by Richard F. McGonegal	112
MEDIUM RARE by Helen Tucker	128

MYSTERY CLASSIC

DANIEL AND SUSANNA and DANIEL AND THE DESTRUCTION OF BEL Anonymous	144
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DEPARTMENTS

EDITOR'S NOTES	4
THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH	69
UNSOLVED by Robert Kesling	89
SOLUTION TO THE JULY "UNSOLVED"	150
BOOKED & PRINTED by Mary Cannon	151
MURDER BY DIRECTION by William Heller	154
THE STORY THAT WON	157

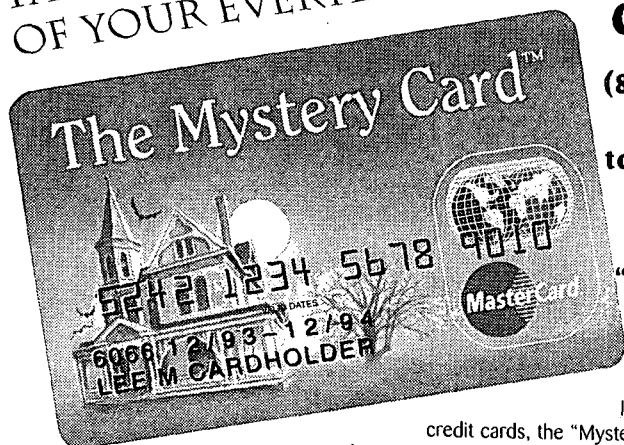
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EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

The Mystery Writers of America's annual awards banquet was held on April 27th in New York, a gala occasion at which mystery and crime writers of both fiction and nonfiction are honored every year. A porcelain bust of Edgar Allan Poe ("the Edgar") is the coveted prize in each of eleven or twelve categories (sometimes an Edgar is given for a play), and other honors are distributed about. Lawrence Block was named MWA Grand Master for this year, for instance, and the Ellery Queen Award was given to Otto Penzler of Otto Penzler Books. In addition, as we announced in the June issue, the Robert L. Fish Memorial Award for Best First Mystery

Short Story of 1993 went to D. A. McGuire for "Wicked Twist," the cover story in our October issue.

The complete list of nominees and winners in each category follows, with the winners in boldface type.

Our congratulations to all!

BEST NOVEL OF 1993:

***The Sculptress* by Minette Walters (St. Martin's)**

Free Fall by Robert Crais (Bantam)

Smilla's Sense of Snow by Peter Hoeg (Farrar, Straus, & Giroux)

Wolf in the Shadows by Marcia Muller (Mysterious)

The Journeyman Tailor by Gerald Seymour (HarperCollins)

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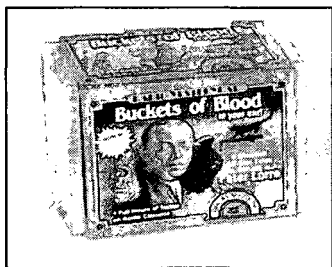
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BEST FIRST NOVEL BY AN AMERICAN AUTHOR OF 1993:

A Grave Talent by Laurie King (St. Martin's)

The List of 7 by Mark Frost (Morrow)

Criminal Seduction by Darian North (Dutton)

The Ballad of Rocky Ruiz by Manuel Ramos (St. Martin's)

Zaddik by David Rosenbaum (Mysterious)

BEST PAPERBACK ORIGINAL OF 1993:

Dead Folks' Blues by Steven Womack (Ballantine)

The Servant's Tale by Margaret Frazer (Jove/Berkley)

Tony's Justice by Eugene Izzi (Bantam)

Beyond Saru by T. A. Roberts (Cliffhanger)

Everywhere That Mary Went by Lisa Scottoline (Harper)

BEST SHORT STORY OF 1993:

"Keller's Therapy" by Lawrence Block (*Playboy*, 5/93)

"The Ghost Show" by Doug Allyn (*EQMM*, 12/93)

"Mefisto in Onyx" by Harlan Ellison (*Omni*, 10/93)

"Enduring as Dust" by Bruce Holland Rogers (*Danger in D.C.*, Donald I. Fine)

BEST YOUNG ADULT MYSTERY NOVEL OF 1993:

The Name of the Game Was

Murder by Joan Lowery Nixon (Delacorte)

Strange Objects by Gary Crew (Simon & Schuster)

Help Wanted by Richie Tankersley Cusick (Archway)

Class Trip by Bebe Faas Rice (Harper)

Silent Witness by Patricia H. Rushford (Bethany House)

BEST JUVENILE OF 1993:

The Twin in the Tavern by Barbara Brooks Wallace (Atheneum)

Tangled Webb by Eloise McGraw (Margaret K. McElderry Books)

The Face in the Besseldorf Funeral Parlor by Phyllis Reynolds Naylor (Atheneum)

Spider Kane and the Mystery at Jumbo Nightcrawler's by Mary Pope Osborne (Knopf)

Sam the Cat, Detective by Linda Stewart (Scholastic)

BEST FACT CRIME OF 1993:

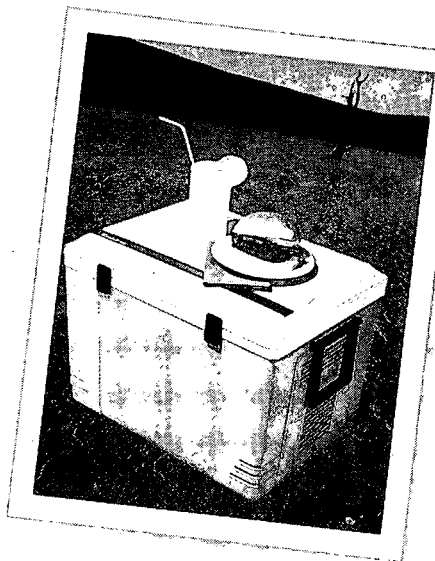
Until the Twelfth of Never by Bella Stumbo (Pocket)

Lindbergh: The Crime by Noel Behn (Atlantic Monthly/Grove)

Final Justice by Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith (Dutton)

The Misbegotten Son by Jack Olsen (Delacorte)

Gone in the Night by David Prottess and Rob Warden (Delacorte)



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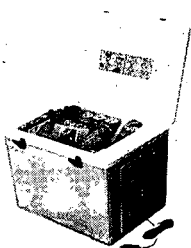
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STUDY OF 1993:**

***The Saint: A Complete History* by Burl Barer (McFarland & Co.)**

***The Fine Art of Murder* edited by Ed Gorman, Martin H. Greenberg, and Larry Seagriff with Jon L. Breen (Carroll & Graf)**

***A Reader's Guide to the American Novel of Detection* by Marvin Lachman (G. K. Hall)**

***The Man Who Wasn't Maigret* by Patrick Marnham (Farrar, Straus, & Giroux)**

***Dorothy L. Sayers: Her Life and Soul* by Barbara Reynolds (St. Martin's)**

BEST MOTION PICTURE OF 1993:

***Falling Down*, written by Ebbe Rose Smith (Warner Bros.)**

***In the Line of Fire*, written by Jeff Maguire (Castle Rock)**

***The Fugitive*, written by Jeb Stuart and David Twohy (Warner Bros.)**

**BEST TELEVISION FEATURE OR
MINISERIES OF 1993:**

***Prime Suspect 2*, written by Allan Cubitt (*Mystery!*, PBS)**

***Caught in the Act*, teleplay by Ken Hixon (USA)**

***1994 Baker Street*, written by Kenneth Johnson (CBS)**

***The Last Hit*, teleplay by Walter Klenhard and Alan**

Sharp (USA)

12:01, teleplay by Philip Morton (Fox West Pictures)

BEST EPISODE IN A TELEVISION SERIES OF 1993:

"4B or Not 4B," *NYPD Blue*, teleplay by David Milch (ABC)

"Conduct Unbecoming," *Law and Order*, teleplay by Michael S. Chernuchin and Rene Balcer (NBC)

"Turpitude," *Picket Fences*, written by David E. Kelley (CBS)

"Rising Sun," *The Commish*, written by Stephen Kronish (ABC)

"Promised Land," *Inspector Morse*, written by Julian Mitchell (*Mystery!*, PBS)

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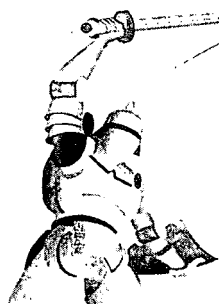
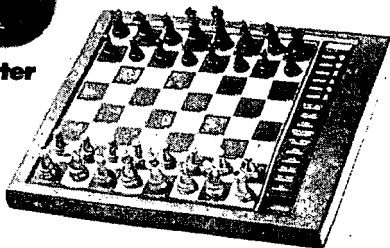
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FICTION



DEAD FLOWERS

by Ashley Curtis

Illustration by Pat Olstad

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“I could kill her,” Peter muttered. “I could absolutely kill her. Perhaps I will.”

The fire wasn’t catching. The newspaper had burned out and the big logs were smoking, but there wasn’t enough kindling to get anything going. Neither of them really cared. It had been Tom’s idea to have a fire on the rainy August night, more for something to do than because it was cold. Outside, the waters of Mermaid Bay beat against the seawall in long swells, and mist blocked out the lights of the village that should have been twinkling on the other side.

“I could take one of her god-damned golf clubs and brain her. She hates us, you know. Thinks we’re good for nothing—which is true. She likes to watch us suffer here, waiting for her to die. Meanwhile she eats her vitamins and pomegranates, takes her pills, and marches through her nineties. I can hardly stand it any more.”

“Then get a job,” Tom muttered.

“We don’t *get* jobs, we Weddingtons,” Peter said sharply. “I’m thirty-three years old and have never had a job, a real job. We don’t *do* that sort of thing. We race, and drink bourbon at cocktail hour, tell good old Republican stories and moan

about the demise of the serving class—”

“Meanwhile we’re out of bourbon, if you’ve noticed,” Tom said indistinctly. “Out of houses, out of boats—since good old Dad went and . . .”

He stopped, then mumbled, “Shouldn’t talk about the old man like that, I guess. Still, he might have told us about her condition before he just abandoned us . . .”

“Look at your fire,” Peter said sharply. “Just look at it!”

Angel backed away from the keyhole and padded silently across the dining room, through the swinging door and back into the kitchen. She let out a long, exhausted sigh. Things had turned sour as soon as the two grandchildren had shown up, supposedly to mourn their father’s suicide. They lived on their allowance now, like children; they were sponging off Mrs. Weddington, playing golf and the stock market, waiting for her to die. Tom fought constantly with his wife when she was there, and they both hit the bourbon earlier every day. Mrs. Weddington had told her not to buy any more; she was happy not to.

Angel was afraid for Mrs. Weddington. She was as tough as an old body could be, but still she was ninety-two and she was frail and she didn’t sleep

well—even if she did get through her nine holes once a week. And when Peter talked of “braining” her, a sickening feeling coursed through Angel’s flesh, and goose pimples pricked her dark arms—thick, flabby arms, already overtired with years of service, ready to lay their burden down.

It was a sweet thought, retirement. When Mrs. Weddington died, Angel would buy that little condo in the village and get a new color TV. She would go shopping for her own groceries, not other people’s, and do something she had always dreamed of doing—learn how to play the piano. She would be able to afford it, too, because she was handsomely remembered in her employer’s will. Mrs. Weddington had even told her so. And after thirty-two years of service, well, she deserved it.

But whenever she thought of her retirement, a queer feeling came over her, and she began to feel uncomfortable—or worse. She sometimes felt as if she was guilty, guilty of some horrible crime. And so she put it all out of her mind.

Max Fremont hadn’t expected Dr. Jenkins to be black. He hadn’t seen him until the beginning of the opera-

tion—the scalpels, tongs, knives, and needles had been unpacked by a young nurse. She had talked nonstop about this and that, the kind of chatter that was supposed to fill time and calm nerves, but it had the opposite effect on Fremont. They’d told him that the lump was probably nothing more than a lipoma, and that at his age it was simply a good idea to take it out. But he didn’t believe anything they said. He was ready to hear the worst.

His reaction to the black surgeon surprised him, showing up the latent prejudice still ingrained in him—even after all those years of work with Jones and Emery. The reaction lasted only a couple of seconds, but he caught it, and despised it, with the sharpness and honesty typical of him. And when Jenkins’ sharp eyes, firm fingers, and low, matter-of-fact voice made clear his competence, Fremont felt bad even for noticing them—while he realized, at the same time, that this was doubly ridiculous.

The stitches were neatly done, the scar thin and unobtrusive. The pathology came back benign, and Fremont, walking down by the river after the phone call, felt enormous relief at having been granted more time to live. But the relief was mixed with a very shaky

feeling: the knowledge that this was just one little thing, and soon they would come hard and fast, that his days were numbered, and not by the murderers, the drug dealers, the arsonists he'd spent his life combatting in New York, but by his own body's inevitable decay—which would fall upon him even here, in soft Vermont, unpredictably and unmercifully.

Returning from his walk he was surprised to see a figure sitting on the rocking chair on his screened porch. It was a typical, quiet Hansor afternoon, the sound of the wind in the heavy maple leaves woven into the distant rushing of the river; the air hot and yet still crisp and clean; the birdbath sitting empty in front of the house—and soon he saw it was a black man on the porch, watching him carefully as he approached. He didn't recognize Dr. Jenkins, whom he hadn't seen without his mask, but when Jenkins stood up and introduced himself, Fremont knew the voice, and panic shot through his body. It hadn't gone so well after all, then.

"Good news on that lump," the doctor said casually.

But what? Fremont thought. He nodded, feeling almost faint, and motioned for Jenkins to sit down.

"I'll get straight to the point," the surgeon said. "It's a bit strange—very strange. I thought I'd come here personally and sound you out."

Fremont asked if he would like a lemonade. The doctor shook his head.

"Mr. Fremont, my mother is a very sharp woman. That's really what it's about."

Fremont nodded again. Get it over with, he thought. I can take it. Just tell me straight.

The doctor smiled.

"She's not an educated woman—far from that. But she knows people."

He paused, looked down, then plunged into his story.

"It's because you used to work for the police, in New York. I don't really know where else to go, you see. She works for an old woman, cleans and cooks for her. To put it in a nutshell . . . my mother thinks the old woman is going to be killed."

"Murdered?"

The doctor nodded. "I'm afraid that's what she means. I'll tell you the situation as best I can."

Fremont listened to the doctor's story, feeling his life reprieved for the second time in an hour. He didn't look at Jenkins, but across the street at the old church. He was listening abstractedly, removed

from the story by a million emotions, and yet, at the same time, there was a part of him that took it all in zealously, glad to grab onto anything that was familiar and continuous.

When Jenkins had finished, they sat in silence for a long time. Finally Fremont said, "Why doesn't she just kick them out?"

The doctor laughed.

"You know, my mother knows these people inside out. I asked her the same question, and she looked at me as if I was an idiot. 'It isn't done,' she hissed at me. 'It isn't done . . .'"

Fremont nodded vaguely.

"It's not very pretty," he said. "What do you want me to do?"

"This may be crazy," Jenkins replied, "but my mother thinks it's going to happen this weekend. It's a Seniors' golf tournament—Tom's wife will be there, so will a couple from Delaware, old friends of Mr. Weddington's—lots of noise and chaos and confusion. My mother thinks someone's going to take the opportunity to . . . well, to do it. I want you to go, you and your wife. Pretend you're golfers. There's room for two more houseguests for the tournament—and between my mother and a friend of mine in the club, we'll see that you get in. It would do her heart a lot

of good, you see, just your being there."

He paused and licked his lips.

"I know this is an outrageous idea. Just say no, it's okay. I just . . . thought I'd try. I didn't know where else to go."

And Fremont thought, this is the man who cut open my skin, who removed a piece of my body. The man who may have to do the same thing again, in other circumstances, and worse—not to mention Martha. He didn't even want to think about its happening to Martha.

"I doubt I can do much," he said. "But if you'd like it, I'll go down."

Angel showed them around the house. Mrs. Weddington was on her morning walk. The "boys" were playing golf, and Tina and the houseguests hadn't yet arrived. It was an old wooden house, built in the style of a country inn, long and thin, with four white chimneys breaking up the steep, wood-shingled roof. Across the street the eighteenth fairway flowed bright green toward the clubhouse, while out back a dried-up lawn was held back from the ocean by a seawall of huge boulders. They fit together like pieces of a puzzle, without mortar, leaving a flat surface on

the top to walk along. Two sets of stone stairs led from the lawn up to this daring promenade.

The bedrooms were upstairs along one side of a dark, narrow corridor. Mrs. Weddington's was at the end of the hall. Angel showed Fremont and his wife into the one next to it. It was spacious, with dormer windows looking out over the sea, untreated wooden walls, and a large fireplace. Two single beds, each with a lamp and night table, were decked in matching yellow bedcovers. The next room down was Tom and Tina's, then Peter's, and then the room where the Martinsens would stay.

"I want to let you see something," Angel said solemnly.

Martha began to unpack their bags while Fremont went out into the hall with Angel. She was plump, matronly, with deep creases in her soft face, her hair pulled tightly back into a bun. She wore a white service uniform, white sandals on her feet.

"This is the missus' room," she said, pointing to the door. "We'll take a quick poke in."

She opened the door quietly. At first the room appeared little different from their own—the untreated wood, the fireplace, two single beds. There were several photographs,

framed, of a man in an Air Force uniform, forty or fifty years old; a pale green rocking chair sat in a corner with a *New York Times* on it, folded open to the crossword puzzle. As Fremont stepped past he saw that the puzzle was completely solved. And then he saw what he hadn't been able to see from the door.

On the other side of the beds a huge aquarium lined the wall—empty of water, with gravel on the floor, a yellow light up in one corner, and some sort of little tree. It was a good two yards long and almost half as wide. At first he was surprised that such a large cage should be needed for the lone white mouse that lived in it, sitting in a corner and cowering. And then he realized that the thick, twisted piece of tubing that stretched and curled almost from end to end was not a toy for the mouse to play in, but a snake as thick as his own arm. It lay there motionless, its head turned to the wall.

"That's Mowgli," Angel said.

"I'm pleased to meet him," Fremont murmured. He took note of the twin latches that would allow the top of the aquarium to be opened. "What is he?"

"Constrictor. She's had him twenty years—ever since her

husband died. Allergic to fur, she is, can't have dogs or cats."

"I see."

"An old woman wants company, sometimes."

Fremont looked up from the snake and out the window above the cage. The wind was up, and whitecaps patterned the bay in swaths of almost parallel white lines. There was a regatta on, dozens of little white sails chopping against the waters far out in the bay. As Fremont watched, a dark figure appeared over the other side of the seawall—first just the head, then an arm lifting a cane, and finally the whole woman, in a black, billowing dress. She teetered along the top of the wall, inching her way forward, her body hunched over at the waist; but every so often she would stop, stand up straight, and gaze out over the bay.

"That's the missus," Angel said. "Every day she's doing this—same walk, same time. Climbs those little steps up from the beach and walks that wall. Ninety-two years old."

Her voice sounded proud.

"If she fell, now?" Fremont asked.

"Three yards down in the water," Angel replied matter-of-factly. "She'd meet the Good Lord, then. Too old for this is

what I say. But she don't listen."

Fremont nodded slowly, then came out with it bluntly.

"And you think the grandchildren want to kill her."

She didn't bat an eye.

"I've heard them talking," she said. "I'm afraid."

She jumped up suddenly.

"I've got to be getting that coffee," she said breathlessly. "I almost forgot."

And she bustled out of the room and down the corridor, leaving Fremont alone in the old woman's bedroom, staring at the sleeping serpent and the trembling little mouse.

“A nd what's your line?"

Henry Martinsen was overweight, overfriendly, and nervous. Fremont stood next to him at the picture window in the living room; each of them had a rum and grapefruit juice in his right hand. Martinsen's wife was standing near the bar talking to Martha and Tina, while Tom sat next to his grandmother in the other part of the room.

"Plastics," Fremont replied. "Put in thirty years with D. W. Thorne. Retired now, God be thanked."

"Plastics," Martinsen repeated. "That was the place to

be, thirty years ago. But if you really want to know what I think, I think you got out just in time. I think we're going to see a crash in plastics—soon. Big deal. A lot of people getting hurt."

"And you?" Fremont asked. The orange sun was disappearing behind a thin strip of clouds that hung motionless above the horizon.

"Rocks," Martinsen said, and laughed. He was mostly bald but let his hair grow long on the sides, where dirty blond curls played above his ears. "Precious stones, semiprecious." He looked around the room quickly. "I was in business with these boys' father," he confided. "That's how come I'm here. He wanted out in '88, so I bought up his share. A year later he was dead."

He shook his head.

"A man shouldn't leave his business," he said. "It's unhealthy. Men and business go together—they fit, you know what I mean? But what'd you do at Thorne's—marketing, or..."

"Mr. Fremont," Peter cut in. "Do tell us what your tee-time is for the qualifying round."

Fremont grimaced.

"Supposed to be eleven," he said. "But I've got this awful pain in my elbow. If it's like

this tomorrow, I'll have to duck out."

Peter didn't smile or offer sympathy. His face looked tense; he appeared to be biting his lip on the inside. Then he suddenly exploded into laughter.

"You ought to go to Cook!" he said bitterly. "Her son's a doctor, surgeon—makes three hundred K a year. You know, affirmative action, that sort of thing."

"Or simply action," Fremont said, then wished he hadn't. "What's your field, Peter?"

"My field's out there," Peter said, jerking a thumb towards the golf course. His nose was red; his heavy, curly blond hair was unkempt. "I've never slaved for money. Never slaved for anything, in fact. Too degrading. Have you talked to my grandmother?"

"This afternoon."

"Pleasant lady, huh?"

Fremont sensed a challenge, countered it neutrally.

"She seems very kind," he said calmly, and saw Tina approaching them. She looked several years younger than the boys, had a pale, angular face with full lips, dark hair pulled back into a leather barrette, a slinky blue sundress over her slender body. Fremont nodded, noticing how she brushed a hand over Peter's shoulder and

touched his fingers with her own as they dropped down.

"It's a beautiful sunset," she said pleasantly.

"It's always beautiful," Peter said brashly. "The sunsets in August are always beautiful. That's why we bought the house."

"We?" Tina teased.

"We Weddingtons. Yes, dammit: *we*."

He stared at Martinsen and seemed to notice him for the first time. Martinsen looked away, then excused himself and slunk off towards the bar. Peter turned to Fremont and whispered intently.

"That man ruined my father."

"Peter!" Tina scolded.

"Well, it's the damned truth," he insisted, too loud. "Why can't we speak the truth once in a while? What the hell's the matter with us here?"

He turned from them and walked towards the bar, then swerved away and yanked open a door that led onto the back porch. He stepped outside, throwing the door closed behind him.

"He gets overwrought sometimes," Tina apologized. "It's the situation—it's his father. You do know . . ."

Fremont nodded. He was watching Peter cross the lawn and sail up the steps onto the

seawall. He stood on the flat top of a boulder, hands in his pockets, curls blowing in the wind.

"He's very goodlooking," Tina said. "Got the looks his brother didn't." She sighed. Then she turned to Fremont with a patient, searching look in her brown eyes and said, "You're goodlooking, too."

Fremont coughed into his hand. He looked around for Martha, helplessly.

"That's how it goes," he muttered. It made no sense, but neither did much else. He felt old and stupid.

A bell rang, and all heads turned. Fremont saw Martha sitting with Tom and Mrs. Weddington; Martinsen was serving his wife a drink. Now Tom helped his grandmother up and glared at Tina, while the whole party walked awkwardly into the dining room.

Mrs. Weddington sat at the head of the table, ate next to nothing, inquired every so often if the food was good and if everyone had enough. Her voice was shaky but still had an edge to it, and when she addressed Tom or Peter, the edge became noticeably sharper. The roast beef was rare and juicy, the potatoes crisp, the green beans fresh and lightly dressed with lemon and pepper. Angel was a good cook.

The conversation jarred. It started and stopped fitfully, usually helped on by Martha and Mrs. Martinsen, then cut off with a sarcastic or impenetrable remark by Peter, or something Tom mumbled that no one understood. As they were finishing their second helpings and nobody was saying anything, Mrs. Weddington, crumbling a crust of bread between her lean fingers, quietly announced, "I went to Hutchinson and Crump last week."

Tom, Peter, and Tina froze.

"I wanted to take care of a few last things, change my will a little. Make a statement, too, to be made public when I die. But I didn't write the statement after all. I want to make it while I'm still alive."

Her eyes, shimmering with some untapped emotion, shifted to Martinsen as she mentioned the "statement." Martinsen looked down at his plate, a neat bead of sweat forming on the very top of his bald head. The table was silent. Martinsen's face had gone pale, Peter's bright red. Mrs. Weddington let a bitter smile escape between her knotted, impossibly wrinkled lips.

"That's all," she said. "Just thought you might like to know."

And she pressed a button with her foot, and they heard a buzzer ringing in the kitchen, and Angel instantly pushed through the swinging door.

"You talked to her. What's she like?"

It was eleven o'clock. The Fremonts had just turned off their reading lights.

"She's sharp as nails," Martha replied, subdued. "But bitter. Something's twisted in her. The boy, Tom, was very gentle, in his mumbling sort of way, but she treated him with contempt. Kept teasing him about some surprise or other that he obviously seemed to know about, while she delighted in not telling what it was."

"Maybe it was what she said tonight."

"Maybe."

They lay silently, listening to the waves outside. Occasionally a gust of wind blew with a low, flutelike tone around the corners of the house.

"I'm sorry," Fremont finally said.

"I don't mind."

But he was sure she did. After all, the blackberries were just now ripe in the Vermont woods, and he knew that she was itching to make jam. He wondered once again just what he thought he was doing there.

*

It was late. He tossed about in the narrow bed. He wasn't used to the waves crashing on the rocks, the smell of the bare wooden walls. And then, as he was finally getting close to sleep, he thought he heard a noise. It kept him on the verge of wakefulness.

It was, he thought, the padding of footsteps in the hall: heavy footsteps trying to be light. They moved slowly, approaching the bedroom door. Then they disappeared.

He lay waiting, stiff, holding his breath. He didn't hear anything now. He got out of his bed, walked quietly to the door and cracked it open. Still nothing. He stepped into the hall.

Twenty years ago—even five years ago, he felt—he would have known what to do. But now he just stood like an idiot, listening to nothing, waiting for his eyes to adjust to the dark. And when they did he still saw nothing. He waited and listened.

Fifteen minutes later he went back to bed, convinced he'd been imagining it all. He intended to stay awake through the night, listening hard, just to be sure. But he didn't. Now that he wanted to stay up, he fell asleep immediately.

When he woke up again it was still dark. He started in

panic. He had been awakened by a noise, a strange whimpering sound, though he couldn't remember it precisely. He thought back on the footsteps he had heard and felt that his inaction had been wrong, terribly, stupidly, unimaginably wrong. He got up, opened the door, and walked into the hall.

In the dim first light of morning he made his way down the passage to Mrs. Weddington's door. The corridor was murky, full of strange dark angles where the stairs started down, and he felt that it was hiding something. He stood at her door and listened, then pressed a hand against it and gently pushed. The latch was closed. He stood still for several seconds, his last chance to back out—and then he turned the knob, pushed in the door, and stepped inside.

He looked around. The curtains were not drawn. The blankets were crumpled up on the far bed; a thin shape was splayed inside. And something glinted by the cage.

The top of the aquarium was open. The hinged glass leaned against the wall.

He felt a tug of fear in his gut. He moved quickly towards the bed and threw the covers off.

The old woman turned and moaned. And he saw what he had been afraid of.

The head was resting on her abdomen. The rest of it trailed off the bed onto the floor. The snake was moving slowly up towards her neck. Mrs. Weddington turned, then turned again. Her eyes opened and she stared at Fremont, felt the snake, and whimpered. "Mowgli!" she cried faintly.

Fremont heard the squeaking of a mouse. Then he lunged forward, grabbed the snake with both his hands and threw it to the floor. The skin was dry and scaly, and the serpent offered no resistance, hardly even felt alive. He grabbed the woman by the arm and shoulder, pulled her out of bed and out the door, slamming it behind them. The light went on in the hall—doors opened. Peter, then Tom and Tina ran into the hall.

"What the—"

"The snake's loose!" Fremont yelled.

"Christ—not again!" Tina cried. And then she was marching angrily down the hall, past Fremont and the confused old woman at the top of the stairs, and before he could stop her she had pushed her way into the bedroom and turned on the lights.

"Come here, you brute!" she called out. "Scaring Grandma again like that. Won't you stay in your damned cage?"

He heard her bustling around, then a heavy thud, the slamming of the lid, the sliding latches. Then she walked back to him. "She looks at it at night," she whispered. "Before she goes to sleep. She forgets to close the lid, and Mowgli gets out and slips into her bed because it's warm. He's very old. I don't think he'd do anything even if he was hungry, and we keep him so well fed he isn't dangerous at all. He hasn't even bothered to eat that mouse."

Tom and Peter were staring at Tina incredulously. Tina laughed nervously, kept brushing her hair back over her shoulder. None of them went to the old woman, who was sobbing gently on the stairs; then Martha emerged from her room, stared at the silent company, and moved directly to her. She put an arm around her shoulders and began to murmur soft and steady words.

And Fremont tried to remember which bedroom door he had seen Tina come from, wearing that oversized white T-shirt, her hair disheveled and her pale skin live with blush.

“I think what you think,” Angel said. Fremont sat in the kitchen across a

small table from her, looking around at the cream-colored walls with the pale blue trim, the arrays of spices and dishes and teas. "But you won't get nothing from her. She'd never give in to opening that cage, even if she did it, and she'd never give in that someone else did it, on purpose, to get rid of her. Too proud. Calls it an accident and that is that."

Fremont nodded.

"Where is she now?"

"On her walk."

Angel stood up and moved over to the sink, where she fiddled with something.

"If you want to watch her, just go down the road. You can see the beach from down a ways. That's where she'll be right now."

Fremont sighed and stood up.

"It's a scorcher," Angel said.

"It certainly is hot," he replied.

He walked down the street, old gray, chunky asphalt, with the golf course on his right and the Weddington lawn to the left. Then the lawn ended at a brick wall, and the road skirted the beach directly. From the corner he could see her, a crooked figure in black, like a bird or even an insect, walking slowly, painfully along the hard sand near the water. He sat down on a rock and watched. When she had gone

about fifty yards, she stopped, turned, and stared out at the sea. Then she turned again and headed back towards the house.

He heard the *thwack* of a driver meeting a golf ball, heard a whistling sound above his head. A group of four men in brightly colored pants and golf shirts advanced down the eighteenth fairway. Two rode in a cart—he thought he knew one of them, from behind, but couldn't quite see who it was. The other two were walking; black caddies at their sides were lugging heavy bags. Fremont stared at the golfers, realizing that he was their age, possibly older—that this would have been one of the alternatives for him.

He turned back. Mrs. Weddington had disappeared. He jumped up and stepped onto the beach, followed the brick wall to the corner where it met the seawall. The scrawny black figure was halfway up a set of wooden steps. He watched as she climbed, paused, climbed again, then stopped at the top of the wall.

It was as Angel had said; the beach soon ended and the waters lapped, gently now, directly against the wall. If she fell it would probably do her in. He waited for her to start walking again. He didn't want her to see him following.

A jetty pushed out into the water in front of him. He walked down to its end, found he could see her easily without appearing to be watching her. Sailboats brightened the bay already, despite the meager wind; their sails were pulled in tight and they moved slowly. Seagulls and terns wheeled about in the air—a tern dived straight down, hitting the water with a violent splash. It fought its way back to the air with a shimmering silver fish in its small beak.

He looked back up at Mrs. Weddington. She had made it a good way along the wall, and someone was approaching her from the other side. He stood watching, fascinated; the second figure looked nervously behind itself and over towards the house, then walked briskly towards the old woman. Mrs. Weddington stopped abruptly; the other figure rapidly put out an arm . . .

Fremont called out, but his voice was weak, washed away by the water and the wind. He ran down the jetty and up the wooden steps, calling as he ran, "Stop! Stop!" He stumbled onto the wall, out of breath, his chest in pain. He tripped over a rock and almost fell, but when he looked up there were still two figures on the wall. And it was only as he reached them,

in his frenzy, that he saw who it was; saw the surprised look on Mrs. Weddington's face as she turned to stare at him; saw that the second figure was Martha, wearing someone else's windbreaker, holding the old woman's hand and looking at him curiously.

He stopped abruptly, feeling dizzy.

"I'm sorry," he finally said, panting, almost crying. "I thought . . ."

"I was just telling Mrs. Weddington how beautiful the house is and how glad we are we came," Martha said calmly.

Fremont nodded dumbly.

"Go on ahead," he said. "I'll . . ."

The pair walked on. Fremont stood up very straight and drew in a long breath. He saw the foursome on the eighteenth fairway but still couldn't place the man he knew. He saw that someone—it was Tom—was sitting in a lawn chair on the porch, reading a newspaper, a glass of water in his hand. He took another steadying breath, watched Martha help the old woman down the steps. They parted, and she started back to him while Mrs. Weddington walked crookedly across the lawn.

"What was all that about?" Martha asked when they met.

Fremont shook his head, still out of breath.

"Nothing, just nerves." He forced a laugh. "I didn't recognize you in that . . ."

"You're getting old."

But her smile softened the words. She looked over at the porch, where Tom was helping his grandmother to the door.

"How is she?"

Martha shrugged.

"I think she's shaken, but she won't let on. She's a very proper woman. Very proud."

They heard the slamming of the screen door. Mrs. Weddington was inside, heading towards the kitchen for her ritual cup of coffee. They would not see her alive again.

They were standing on the lawn when Angel ran out, screaming that she was dead. Fremont lunged after her, then before her, into the kitchen. He found the old woman on the floor next to the little table, without pulse, already turning cold. Her eyes were half open but empty; the spark that had animated her frail body had made a neat, quick, easy exit, and only her shell remained. It hardly even seemed like a dead body—more like the carapace of a withered beetle, dried out in the sun. He forced the others—Tina, Tom, Peter, and Angel—out of the kitchen again

and called the police. The Martinsens had not shown up—someone said that they were playing golf.

He stood by the door to the kitchen, alone in the room with the corpse. The empty coffee cup was sitting on the table; it would have to be checked out. But even as his mind ran mechanically through police procedure, inside he felt himself a failure: pathetic, useless, and too old. When the ambulance finally took her away, he had the feeling it was taking something of him, too—his confidence, what little of youth remained in him, what little vital force. The sergeant who showed up listened to his story grudgingly; he carefully wrapped the coffee cup in a paper bag, took a sample from the pot, then walked upstairs to have a look at the snake. Then he said, knowingly, "Of course, with what you and Mrs. Jenkins have said, there'll be a P.M. But these black maids tell tales, you know—and she *was* ninety-two years old. I wouldn't think too much about it, Mr. . . ."

"Fremont."

"Fremont. I'm sorry, I'd forgot."

And the officer, burly, mustachioed, forty-five, turned away from him without even bothering to say, "That will be all."

It took a day for the results of the autopsy to be known. The houseguests, the grandchildren, and Tina walked separately around the house, along the beach, down the golf course. The kitchen had been sealed off—a junior officer sat inside, reading a paperback novel—so they all drove into town for meals, and ate at separate restaurants, none of which was very good. Fremont hoped the old woman had had a heart attack; perhaps the jolt of the caffeine on the hot morning would have brought it on. Then they could go home and try to forget about it all.

"But you don't believe it, do you?" Martha asked, looking at him over his half-eaten crab-meat salad, his buttered hot dog roll.

"You mean *you* don't," he said, and wished he was back in Vermont.

When a crime-scene unit from New Bedford showed up to go over the kitchen, Fremont knew that she was right. Later, a detective named O'Connor questioned everyone. He knew who Fremont was and sought him out again before he left.

"*Anthromax*," he said solemnly. "Kills soon after it's administered. Ten, fifteen minutes for a healthy man—unpredictable for an old wom-

an. Looks like cardiac arrest, which it is, in fact. If you hadn't tipped us off . . ."

"In the coffee?"

The man nodded.

"A heavy dose. I'm surprised she didn't taste it—it isn't pleasant stuff. But I suppose her taste buds were gone."

He paused.

"We've seen the will," he said. "Everything's left to the cook. No mention of the grandchildren. Newly made up, a week ago."

"Did she know?"

"Says she didn't. But of course that's what she would say. There doesn't seem to be much doubt. By her own admission she brewed and served the coffee. She was there the whole time, and no one came in who could have tampered with it."

"Was it in the pot, or just the cup?"

"The cup."

"And where'd the cup come from?"

"One of a dozen on the shelf. None of the others have a trace of anything. We've thought of that already—a few crystals sitting in an empty cup, waiting to be used . . ."

The man shook his head.

"And people use those cups all the time, whoever makes tea or coffee. It'd have been far too risky anyway . . ."

Fremont nodded. He had drunk from those cups several times himself. He was clutching at straws.

"Sugar?"

"She didn't take it. Cream either."

The man paused.

"It's not even like someone could have dropped a few grains in through an open window. The screens were all down, latched on the inside. And she says she was in the kitchen the whole time, and swears that nobody came in."

He paused, then went on quietly.

"Besides which, everyone else is totally accounted for. That coffee was only poured after Mrs. Weddington reached the kitchen. Tom was on the porch, according to your wife; the Martinsens were on the golf course, vouched for by any number of golfers; and Peter and Tina were next door, chatting with a neighbor till they heard the screams. So even if you think the cook is crazy, or covering something up, who the hell's she doing it for?"

Fremont barely nodded.

"We've got her in town, but she'll probably be taken to New Bedford soon, to be held until trial. Maybe you'll want to talk to her, seeing as . . ."

"Seeing as she's my doctor's mother?" Fremont said bit-

terly. "Do the grandchildren know about the will?"

"Not yet. But I guess the money will end up going to them after all."

"It doesn't make sense," Fremont said. "Why would she ask me to come down if she planned to murder her?"

"Maybe she didn't. Maybe your doctor had an inkling himself. Maybe that's why *he* sent you down—to try to stop his mother."

He shrugged.

"Who knows. It's a pretty open and shut case."

And the grandchildren split the inheritance, Fremont thought. It worked out very nicely for them, didn't it?

And yet, however he turned it over in his mind, he could see no way that anyone but Angel could have poisoned Mrs. Weddington. Even after he made the trip to New Bedford and talked to her, went over every stage in the brewing, pouring, drinking of the stuff in painstaking detail—there was simply no one else who'd had the opportunity. Even as she protested her innocence, her story was convicting her beyond all doubt.

But why didn't she invent, then? Did she have no imagination? How could she have thought she'd get away with it? It almost made him angry.

He thought of the clear, sharp eyes of Dr. Jenkins, peering out over the pale surgical mask as he worked on his body, cut open his back, removed a bloody lump of fat and showed it to him in a little metal dish shaped like a kidney. The way the man had been waiting for him on his own screened porch, the tentativeness of his request . . . and Fremont began to feel, uncomfortably, like he was being used.

Hansor, Vermont, didn't look the same on their return. Everything was a little dingier: the white paint on the church was peeling underneath the eaves, and gray grit streaked the bottom of the clapboards. The Big Red restaurant looked tacky, its neon sign in bad taste. The general store was full of junk: candy and potato chips and Wonder bread—everything had lost its aura of cleanliness, inviolability.

"You don't think she did it," Martha stated matter-of-factly as she watered the plants on the porch. Fremont, stretched out lethargically on the chaise longue, took a long time to reply.

"She must have done it," he finally muttered.

Martha was examining the leaves of a ficus tree.

"These little worms . . ." she started to say. Then she looked up at him, piercingly, and spoke sharply.

"You know as well as I she didn't do it."

Fremont shrugged.

"Maybe our judgment isn't what it used to be. We're getting old, Martha, don't forget that."

She put down the watering can and stood staring at him, her hands on her hips. Finally, uncharacteristically, she exploded.

"Max Fremont, you listen here! You're *making* yourself old with your own damned fear of it! I'd never think a man who dealt with murder all his life could be so scared of death. You're no older than I am, and I am not old! But you can *think* yourself sick, and you can *think* yourself old, and in my opinion you're doing both of those right now, and ever since that doctor took that little piece of fat from you—which hasn't got a thing to do with age, little children get lipomas, for God's sake! Shape up, Max, or you'll ship yourself right out!"

And she turned and stormed through the door into the living room.

Fremont didn't move. He closed his eyes and pressed his fingers against his eyelids, let

out a little moan, and seemed to fall asleep.

As he closed his eyes he saw the foursome on the fairway once again. He realized who it was he'd recognized. It was the little curls above the ears. Martinsen had been playing the eighteenth.

It was, like so much else, utterly pointless and irrelevant.

She sat up next to him in bed, suddenly, bolt upright, shattering his sleep. He turned to her. She was stretching her hand out towards him and, finding his shoulder, clutched and unclutched it. Her back was straight and her eyes stared directly ahead.

She had seen it in a dream, but she knew the dream was real. She was standing next to Max on the seawall, and Mrs. Weddington was crossing the lawn, and Tom put down his newspaper as she approached. He stood up politely. Then Martha turned away, didn't see any more, until after the old woman was inside. But then, then—then he had poured . . .

Fremont arrived at 59 Clubhouse Road just after noon. There were no cars in the driveway; he parked his own on the side of the road, down by the brick wall. He made his way onto the beach, past the jetty,

up the flight of wooden steps. He walked down the seawall as seagulls squawked above him and the gentle water barely struck against the rocks. He stopped and looked over towards the porch. Then he stepped down and crossed the lawn.

He paused at the edge of the porch. On either side a window box—green-painted wood with deep brown soil—had been planted out with pansies. He bent down to examine them and felt a thrill run through his body. It seemed to wake him out of a long hibernation. He smiled.

The purple pansies in one box were thriving, rich with deep green leaves, thick, smiling petals. But the first plant in the box on the left was withered—the leaves were brown and brittle, the petals limp and hanging down.

He stood up straight again. He would go directly to a telephone . . .

He was aware, suddenly, of a shadow next to him. He turned quickly. Peter Weddington stood just behind him, hands in the pockets of his dark linen jacket, his curly blond hair rich and decadent, his big lips unpleasantly spread out.

"What are you doing here."

His voice was low and cold. He phrased the question as a

statement—a statement of malice and displeasure.

Fremont turned all the way around to face him.

“Just looking at your flowers,” he said calmly.

Peter looked down at the flowerboxes, quickly, disdainfully.

“You happen to be trespassing on my property.”

Fremont shrugged.

“A friendly visit,” he said slowly. “Checking out a horticultural curiosity.”

He realized he had said too much. Peter stared at him, chewing his lower lip.

“I happen to know that you’re not a golfer, Mr. Fremont. You’re not a member of the Seniors and you’re not welcome on my property, either. You used to be a cop once, but you’re not a cop any more—you’re an old snoop in the employ of a dirty surgeon whose mother’s an illiterate, murdering maid. I’m asking you to leave this property.”

Fremont looked into Peter’s eyes, wondering whether he had understood. The eyes only narrowed, becoming thin and unreadable.

“Okay,” he said softly. “I’m going.”

He turned his back and started walking down the lawn. His body was tense, ready to spring to the ground and roll if

he had the luck to survive a first shot. But he heard nothing—he reached the corner of the house and glanced back, saw Peter Weddington still standing motionless next to the porch. Fremont turned the corner and took off, walking quickly towards the car.

He drove the short distance to the clubhouse, picked up the receiver of the pay phone, and deposited his quarter. The man’s name was O’Connor. He hoped he was in.

Hansor quickly regained its magic. On his return the leaves hung so heavily on the maple trees, the sky was such a perfect blue, the sparrows dipped their wings so lightheartedly into the bird-bath that he couldn’t believe he had seen it any other way. Martha noted approvingly that he was walking with a freer stride, that his shoulders had lost their slouch, that a smile burned in his eyes again.

Dr. Jenkins, a glass of Martha’s elderberry lemonade in his hand, stood by the door of the screened porch, looking out.

“I’d lost all hope,” he said. “A black cook in a WASP household, tried in an all-white community—she’d have had enough going against her if the case was

weak. But it was airtight! What'd you do?"

Fremont grinned, swaying back and forth gently in the rocking chair. Martha muttered something unintelligible, got up, and went into the house. Dr. Jenkins turned, waiting for the explanation.

"It was her," Fremont said proudly, nodding towards the house. "She'd seen something, forgotten it, and then it came back in a dream. She wasn't even sure if it had really happened. So I went down to check."

He took a sip of lemonade, placed it on the table next to him.

"She'd seen Mrs. Weddington cross the lawn, seen her grandson put down his newspaper and stand up to greet her. She didn't see what happened next—she was talking to me—but after Mrs. Weddington went into the house she noticed something very strange."

"What was it?"

"Tom Weddington, pouring out a glass of water into a window box of pansies."

"And?"

"Well, it fit. It was a terribly hot day—an old woman, thirsty, coming back from a walk in the sun—wouldn't she appreciate a sip or two of water? He knew that in a minute she'd be in the kitchen drink-

ing her usual cup of coffee. How easy to offer her the poisoned water—then, after she'd drunk her coffee and died, to rush into the kitchen and drop a couple of grains of Anthromax into the coffee dregs. In all the confusion, who would notice it? But first—get rid of the dirty water. Pour it out into the flowers.

"So I went down to Clubhouse Road again, saw the dead pansy in the window box, and had my confirmation. Called the police, had them take the box and analyze the soil—bingo!"

Jenkins shook his head and smiled, turning it all over in his mind.

"And what about the snake?" he finally asked. "Was that Tom Weddington as well?"

Fremont chuckled.

"I couldn't say," he said. "It might have been any of them, really—they all wanted to kill her. The grandchildren and Tina needed her money desperately, and Martinsen had blackmailed her son into selling out his business, cheap, which ruined him and drove him to suicide. Apparently the old woman had found something out, wanted to get back at him with some sort of public statement. If you really want to know what I think . . ."

The doctor nodded.

"I think Martinsen tried to kill her with the snake. He was the only one who didn't know how old it was, and how well fed. The footsteps that I heard in the hall were heavy, and he's awfully fat. But then Tina came out, and she thought Peter or Tom had done it—Tom, probably, since I'm almost sure she came out of Peter's room—and so she put on that whole scene, throwing everyone for a loop. But we'll never know the truth."

He paused, then said hesitantly, "And your mother's come into a lot of money."

Jenkins shook his head.

"She's already getting ready to give it away. Dirty money, she calls it—says she doesn't want a thing to do with it. I'm trying to convince her to keep at least a decent share of it, after thirty years, but she's a damned proud woman, and I've never been much good at making her take money. I don't know."

He paused.

"You've saved her life, Mr. Fremont."

And maybe one day you'll save mine, Fremont thought. But he tried to bundle it away and, looking across the street at the old church, didn't say anything at all.

FICTION

A Knowledge of Poisons

by Gregor
Robinson

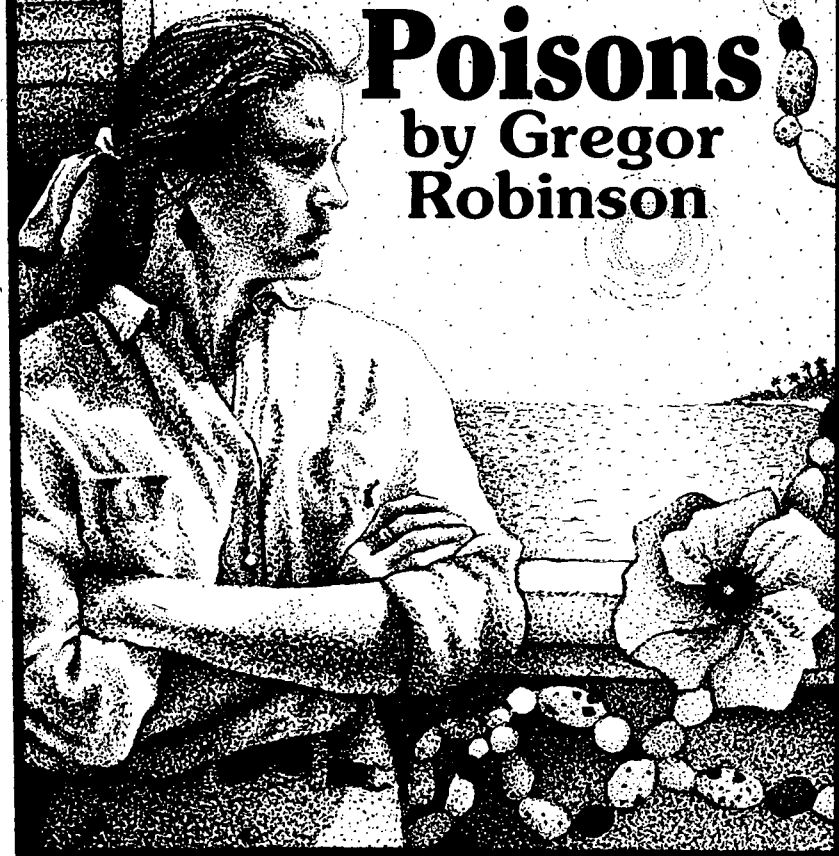


Illustration by Mark Penta

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“**T**his place is hell to me,” said Mrs. Reider. Through the window behind her I could see the green water of the harbor shimmering in the morning sun. The sky was brilliant and cloudless. The windows were open and the wind carried a trace of the perfume of exotic blossoms into the room. There was no glass in the windows, only wooden shutters to keep out the cold nights and the hurricanes in the fall. If we were to stroll out the door and up the low hill on the other side of the walk—the main street was a paved path; there were no cars in the village—we would come upon the ocean crashing on the reef, the waves foaming in long fingers on the white sand.

“I tell you, I’m glad to be leaving.” Mrs. Reider sounded exhausted. I noticed for the first time the trace of an accent in her voice. (“She’s foreign,” Mrs. Holborne had told me, “of course she is!”)

Mrs. Reider looked away from me and out the window. She was small and dark, with delicate features. Her hair, deep auburn, was pulled back from her head. She was the most exotic of us; she was said by the ladies of the Yacht Club to be able to speak several languages—eastern European unfortunately; French would have been preferable. She was forty at most, only a little older than I was. That was one of the things I thought we had in common. She was years younger than the retired lawyers, businessmen, foreign service officers and preserved ladies who made up most of the expatriate community. They had tans or mottled sunburns. They wore clothing in primary colors and pastels. They were rich and well-groomed, but they were dowdy next to Mrs. Reider, like strutting pigeons, inappropriate beneath the palm trees.

Most fantastic of all to the members of the Club was that the Reiders had actually been prepared to live here—not just in the winter, or for the months when the tax laws made it necessary for people to “establish domicile,” as the phrase went, but all the time. They had bought the senator’s house, next to the cholera cemetery. Exposed to the Atlantic and closer to the village than any of us would have liked, the senator’s house had always been among the most popular of the tourist rentals. There were spectacular views of the Atlantic from both sides of the point.

The Reiders installed an immense cistern—the first new one to have been built on Pigeon Cay in many years—so that they could have the luxury of a full-sized bathtub and a washing machine. That was the first we knew of them: a bright orange backhoe for

the building of the cistern arriving one morning on a barge from across the channel. The Reiders were not going to send their laundry out to be done by the Haitian women as the rest of us did. They would make a permanent home here, along with the poor Bahamians, the Haitian refugees, the deranged exiles from Latin America. They would do their laundry at home. We rather disdained them for that.

I was also trying to make a life in the islands. Like Mr. Reider, I had a job—three days a week the bank was open—which gave me position, and a certain knowledge about the people. I was almost a member of the local community. All the same, I saw myself as a romantic figure, an exile from a bittersweet past. I believe there is that melancholy quality—secretly cherished—to the lives of most expatriates. Also a certain loneliness, because you never belong. Mrs. Reider was the most lonely of us all.

The name of the plant was *Ricinus communis*; the family, Euphorbiaceae. It is native to Africa but is now at home throughout the tropics. It is cultivated in India and Brazil, largely for its oil. Castor oil. It may reach a height of fifteen feet. Deep red in color, the fruit is bristly and spined and grows in thick clusters. Some cultivate the plant solely for its beauty.

"I didn't know they were poison," said Mrs. Reider. She was still looking away from me, out the window. "I suppose you and the others will never believe that now."

"For what it's worth, I believe you," I said.

I was lying. I did not believe her for a moment. There might have been an accident, but I believed she had wanted out, one way or the other; she almost said as much to me that day on the beach; certainly she had discussed it with the man from Trinidad. I agreed with Father McEndrick: all actions have motivation; some motivation is subconscious, and remains a mystery for ever. But she was leaving us for good now, emigrating to Israel she said, and there seemed little point in making these distinctions, as though I were some expert on matters of the human heart.

This would be the last time I saw Mrs. Reider. She had come to ask me to transfer the balance of her account to a bank in New York, together with the necessary documents.

There was something I suppose I might have noticed from the beginning—the trouble she and Reider had over money. It was a

question of who would exercise power. Her first visit to me had been after they had been on Pigeon Cay for about three months. She came in for the usual reason: she wanted more money. Impossible, I told her: I could not authorize transfers from her husband's accounts to either the joint account or her own. By the regulations, I should not have revealed to her even details like those—that her husband had a personal account as well as a business account—but I was lonely. In the evenings, I stayed up late in my cottage with a glass of rum or two and made up my journal. I had started to make notes on the flora of the islands.

Mrs. Reider said things, told me things about herself that I would have liked to interpret as a kind of invitation. I had spoken with her several times at the Terrace Bar of the Majestic Hotel before she came into the bank that first morning. She said, "My husband is away for days, even weeks at a time."

It was not the brassy flirtatiousness you saw at the Yacht Club, among the wives of amateur sailors who had made their money and retired early, and that appealed to me.

Mrs. Reider said, "I sometimes need more than he gives me."

"I am sorry I cannot help you." I tried to curb a tendency to officiousness in my manner. I came out from behind my desk. "You must understand my position, Mrs. Reider. The bank has rules."

She changed the subject. "Sometimes we are bored here, Chloe and I. Can you believe it?"

I offered to show her the island. There was an outboard I could borrow. We would cross through the bush to where the boat was docked; after the boat ride, we would have a picnic at a secluded beach beyond White Narrows.

Soon after that meeting I learned that, like her husband, Mrs. Reider had taken to traveling by herself. She had taken several trips away from the island. These had not gone unnoticed by the ladies at the Club; little that happened in the village did. Inquiries had been made. It was at the Club that I heard about Mrs. Reider's trips. Most evenings the place was shuttered tight, but it was a Thursday, Ladies' Bridge Night, and the Snug Bar was open. We were at close quarters, for the Pigeon Cay Yacht Club was nothing more than a one room house with a kitchen behind a partition, a toilet, and a trellised patio. The bar ran along one of the sides of the main room, in what had once been a storage cupboard. It was all done up prettily in white and green.

"The last time she took a water-taxi across the channel, not the regular ferry. Two o'clock in the afternoon." This from Mary Hargreaves. She was a bony, fluttery person. Silence made her nervous, so she quickly added, "Tom was down at the harbor fussing with his boat and he saw her—that's how I know."

"That would mean she was taking the three o'clock plane," said Grace Wood, whose husband had made a fortune manufacturing plastic mesh baseball caps. She tapped her nose with the pencil, she was the scorekeeper. "That is the plane to Nassau. She must be going someplace in the Caribbean. Otherwise she'd have taken one of the later flights, to Florida."

"Probably visiting her husband," said Mrs. Holborne's niece Hermione. You could tell that she wasn't quite bored. She was visiting from Massachusetts and did not know Mrs. Reider.

"Mr. Reider is in Honduras this week," said Mary Hargreaves, playing her trump. The others eyed her, waiting for more. "Burnett told Tom," she said.

Play continued.

"So? She's having an affair," said Hermione. "So what?"

There was silence at the table. As an outsider, Hermione could not have been expected to know any better.

"I am the last one to cast aspersions," said Mrs. Holborne, who was from Connecticut and had the suggestion of an English accent. "My own youth was not exactly colorless. But there was never a child involved."

"Of course not," said Mary Hargreaves.

"By the time I was Mrs. Reider's age, my children were grown up and away at school," said Mrs. Holborne.

"She is only the stepmother," said Grace Wood.

"All the same," said Mrs. Holborne.

"So where do you suppose she *does* go on these little jaunts?" Grace Wood asked.

The bartender handed me my drink. The three older women looked up. The question had been put to me, but I could tell them nothing. I sipped my rum and grapefruit and gazed at the ceiling fan.

Boat rides and picnics at quiet beaches were among the few diversions we could offer visitors to Pigeon Cay. There was a single road on the island and nowhere much to go on that. On other islands there were condominiums and casinos. Or ponies and wild

pigs, giant iguanas and snakes, dense forests where you could become lost. But not here. Not on Pigeon Cay.

I made my way through a pack of stray dogs and up the path to the senator's house. The child answered the door. In her hair she wore a red hibiscus blossom.

"I'm six," she said. "I have a sore." She held out her hand so that I could inspect the bandage, grey and fingered.

"Shall I kiss it better?" I asked.

"Will I have to take the bandage off?"

"Certainly not," I answered.

She held out her hand again. She had dark eyes like her father's. Otherwise she was small and fair, like her mother must have been. After I kissed her hand, she stood inspecting me. She chewed on a long gold necklace that she wore around her neck.

A fat black woman appeared from the kitchen and whisked the girl away. I waited in the living room, which was whitewashed, sparsely furnished, and smelled of disinfectant. Mrs. Reider came down the narrow stairs. Her hair was held back by a knotted silk scarf. She wore crisp cotton slacks, a cream-colored blouse, and a string of irregular beads, mottled black and brown and white, like camouflage. I thought she looked elegant but overdressed for a boat ride and a picnic.

She picked up a net bag by the door that held her bathing suit, a towel, a pack of American cigarettes. I stood waiting until she said, "The child will not be coming with us." That was how she referred to her, "the child." The sea was too cold.

"The sea is not at all cold," I said.

But Chloe had been ill, she said, and Mr. Reider had ordered that she not be allowed into the water. I thought perhaps Mrs. Reider wanted to be alone with me.

We walked along the dusty road from the village, then turned off on a trail that took us past the Haitian refugee settlement, along the back of the harbor, through the swamp they called Fish Mangrove. Tiny succulent oysters at one time grew on the roots and skeins of the mangrove here, but poisons from the engines and toilets of the gleaming yachts in the harbor had ended that. Now rank algae bloomed in the lagoon, and the pulsating jellyfish were everywhere. We trod over soggy bits of paper, plastic bottles, used condoms. Then we were out of the swamp and into the woods. Half an hour later we emerged from the shadows into the garden of the house called Pigeon Point, the green sea sparkling beyond. This

was where the outboard was kept.

We traveled up the low coastline. I pointed out the house of the famous actor from New York, the tower in the forest that had been put up by a land developer from Nassau, the places where freighters had foundered, the rocks and coral outcrops. It was impossible for us to venture beyond the lee of Pigeon Cay because the wind was swinging around from the east and the rage between the outer islands was strong that day.

Just beyond the narrows—we could hear the Atlantic Ocean crashing on the other side—I beached the boat in the sand. The sky had grown overcast, the water grey. We did not swim. After spreading the picnic blanket and setting out the lunch, we sat side by side on the beach, facing the sea.

Mrs. Reider was silent.

"You've been away," I said. She looked at me as if to ask a question. "In Pigeon Cay, news travels fast."

"I was in Trinidad," she said.

This was February. She would have been there during carnival. "Did you wear a costume?" I asked. "Did you join the parades, the dancing in the streets?"

"Only for one night." She touched the sombre beads around her neck in a way that reminded me of the little girl. "Those southern islands are different from here. Much more life."

"It's the Latins," I said, "the people from South India, the Africans. This island, on the other hand, was settled by the same Puritans who settled New England."

I saw that her eyes were red-rimmed. I put my hand on her arm, but she turned and gave me a stony look.

"Allergies," she said. "My husband travels a great deal," as though it were that to which she was allergic. Her husband was a consultant, an engineer who specialized in hydraulics and the handling of liquids—oil, chemicals, even the black molasses that was shipped north and turned into rum. She said, "I know they are saying at the Club that I met a man there, in Trinidad. It's true."

"Oh?" I said.

"He says I should leave this place."

She was shilly-shallying; she did not know what to do, whether to take her friend's advice and leave Pigeon Cay, whether to stick it out with Reider. She had no money of her own, I knew that. I think the man from Trinidad had told her something else as well, about another road to freedom.

*

At the Yacht Club, opinion started to shift. The husband was away too much. She was lonely. She needed companionship. Reider had been seen at the airport in Freeport with another woman. Now there was sympathy for Mrs. Reider.

"When mine behaved like that, my second one, Mr. Norman—the children always called him Mr. Norman although in point of fact his name was Schlumburger—I confronted him at once," said Mrs. Holborne. "I did not moon about. I did not travel. I did not take a lover. I simply told him to go. I believe I may have thrown something. A piece of glass, a little sculptured thing."

"He was your second. It might have been different had you married later in life," said Grace Wood.

"I did marry later in life," said Mrs. Holborne.

"I meant for the first time," said Grace Wood. "Poor Mrs. Reider."

Mary Hargreaves said, "The husband travels on business. He can't be blamed for that." As a rule, Mary Hargreaves believed worse of wives than of husbands.

Mrs. Holborne paused, a Campari and soda halfway to her lips. "Of course, my dear." She returned the glass to the table. "Opportunity. In my experience, that is what business trips are to men. I do not mean opportunity to conduct business."

This was Sunday, a regatta luncheon behind the flowered trellis at the Pigeon Cay Yacht Club. We were waiting for the boats to come in. The Reiders were not present. To the committee's immense surprise, Reider had declined an invitation to let their names stand for membership. This had never happened before. One couple had been blackballed—real estate agents from Toronto—but no one had ever declined. Reider was never forgiven for that.

It's what is called a masquerade poison because the symptoms—abdominal pains, nausea, cramps, dehydration—are easily mistaken for viral or bacterial infection. The symptoms then become serious—shock and convulsions, kidney failure, often death, and the culprit is unmasked.

At first the problem was taken for a severe cold or flu of some kind. Father McEndrick came into the bank the day she took ill. "Perhaps you have noticed her," he said. The children often came down the road at recess and at lunchtime. And when the schoolday

was over, they paraded by my open door, for most were the children of local people and lived in the north end of the village where the houses were small and old and in need of a coat of paint.

"A fairhaired little girl. She wears a flower in her hair," said Father McEndrick. "They think it's Mrs. Johnson's fault." The nanny. She had allowed her to go swimming. Father McEndrick knew Mrs. Johnson because she was a Catholic. He shook his head. "I hate this kind of thing."

He stood waiting by my desk; he wanted me to do something. "You might go over to the house, see what you can do. The family is one of your people." Father McEndrick was black and I was white, but that is not what he meant. He meant the child was from one of the expatriate families. By then, of course, I knew exactly who he meant.

For the second time I made my way through the stray dogs to the house on the point. The wind had continued strong for days; it howled around the house and though the palms.

Reider answered the door. He said nothing. From the tight way he moved, I guessed he was furious. Mrs. Reider stood by the living room window, looking out to the ocean. Mrs. Johnson sat on an old cane chair in the breezeway to the kitchen. She was holding her stomach, swaying back and forth. She moaned as though she were the one who was ill. She had been weeping.

"Ignorant woman," Reider muttered.

"How did it start?" I asked.

"Said she had a sore mouth. A burning in the mouth. An hour or two later, diarrhea. You're no doctor. Can't we get the bloody doctor?"

In my notebook I have written: Ricin, a toxalbumin, prevents protein synthesis in the intestinal wall. Poisoning is apparent after a latent period of several hours. It is characterized by nausea, emesis, diarrhea.

The doctor arrived as darkness was falling. She had flown in from Eleuthera and raised the ferryman at Marsh Harbour.

"I think poison," she said after a quick examination. She could not say how serious the damage would be. The child would have to be moved to where there were better medical facilities, by air from Great Abaco probably. By this time Father McEndrick had arrived. He and Reider brought the girl downstairs. It was impossible to believe that she would live. She seemed shrunken inside her tiny frame. She was dead white. Her eyes fluttered, and occasion-

ally her head rolled from side to side. The hibiscus blossom was blood red in her hair. Around her neck she wore the ugly, tick-shaped beads, mottled black and brown and white.

I have written in my notebook: Other effects are secondary to massive fluid and electrolyte loss and intestinal dysfunction . . . ingestion of two to six seeds of this very strong toxin may be fatal.

I had seen the child once here at the house, and I had seen her often skipping on the sidewalk in front of the bank, the red hibiscus in her hair. Chewing her necklace.

I leaned towards her. The beads were light, which surprised me. They were slippery to touch, as though coated in wax. I remembered her coming to the door, asking to me kiss her hand, watching me, the gold necklace in her mouth.

"She has been chewing the beads," I said.

Mrs. Reider turned quite pale. I thought for a moment she might faint. "The beads," she whispered.

The Crown wanted the matter treated as criminal, attempted murder, but there were influential people in that community: Burnett, Tom Hargreaves, Mrs. Holborne, whose money talked. We didn't want a murder on Pigeon Cay. Besides, there was sympathy for Mrs. Reider.

Mrs. Reider turned from the window. She began to gather up her bags. She put the papers I had given her into her purse.

"Where did the poison come from?" I asked.

"The toxin is ricin from the seed of the castor oil plant." She had not answered my question, but she had a knowledge of poisons all along.

I asked, "Where did the beads come from?"

"They were a present, from a friend." She did not have to say that she was speaking of the man from Trinidad. Now I didn't want to know more. But she said, "He gave me the beads. It was at carnival, we were drinking, joking. 'You just scrape them like this,' he said—" she motioned with her hand "—and then you have the seeds."

The bell of the village school rang out, not the piercing ring of an electric bell, but the ding-ding of a country school. Mrs. Reider jerked her head at the sound of the bell. She looked at me. We heard the children's voices, a ball bouncing on the sidewalk. Mrs. Reider had been described by the magistrate in New Providence

as "negligent." It was the nanny, Mrs. Johnson, who had actually given the beads to the child. She would let the girl wear her mother's clothes and jewelry on those long afternoons when the Reiders had gone away on airplanes to meet their lovers. She would plait the child's hair, entwining there a blossom from the blood red hibiscus that grew at the back of the house.

Mrs. Reider stood to go. She clutched the purse in front of her. She looked like a little girl herself. I wanted to say something but could not. She handed me a slip of paper with her forwarding addresses. She shook my hand. "Thank you for your help." I said nothing. My help had been a functionary's—bringing pressure to bear through the head office in Nassau, getting the names of the lawyers. I wished I had had no part of it, that I knew nothing of the flora of the islands.

Mrs. Reider left by the back door in order to avoid the children from the school. I watched her make her way down the path beneath the frangipani to the government pier. I heard the rumble of the engines of the noon ferry that waited for her there in the bright lagoon.

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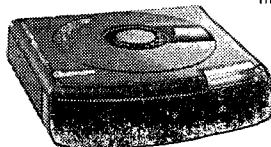
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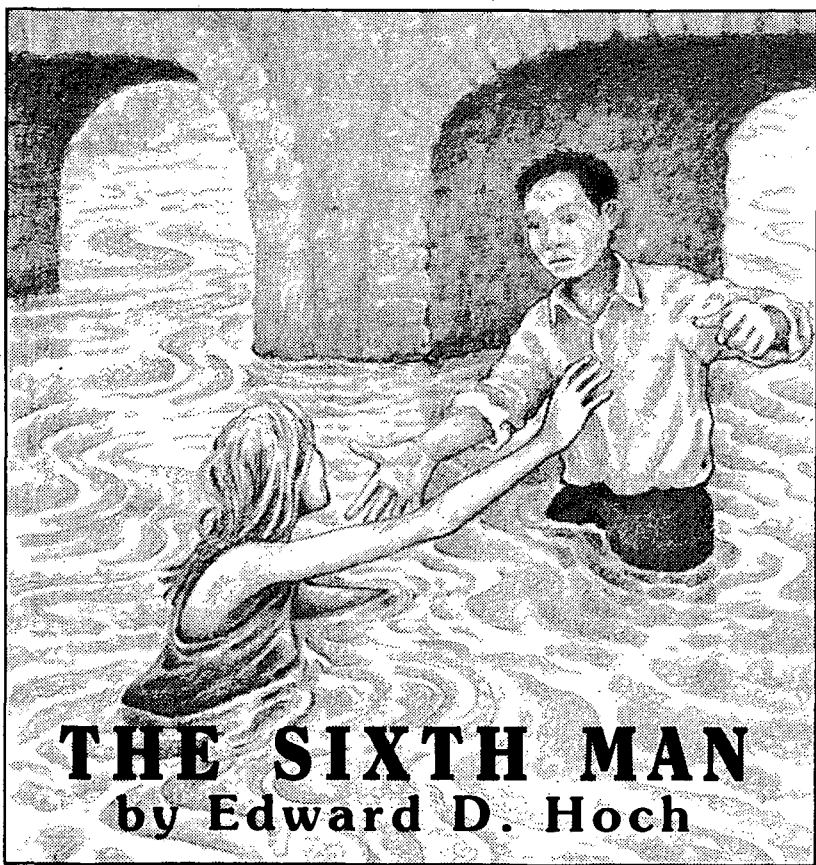
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THE SIXTH MAN

by Edward D. Hoch

Bradford Dillon had never thought of himself as a knight-errant, or any sort of a knight for that matter. He was a London investment banker, just past his thirty-first birthday, and his life thus far had been amaz-

ingly dull. There was no other explanation for the fact that this summer's holiday consisted of a drive through the Cotswolds in a little red Audi, without even a dog for companionship.

It was on a narrow country

lane, on the third day of his solitary travels, that Brad encountered the young woman who was to force a sudden change in his holiday plans. He saw her first in the center of the road, frozen there like a young fawn in a spotlight, though it was still a good hour before sundown. She turned frightened eyes toward his approaching car and then sprinted toward a low wall at the side of the road. Only after she'd gone over did Brad realize it was a bridge. He saw the splash as she hit the water below, and he was out of his car in an instant.

"Help me!" she shouted from the water. He ran down the bank to the edge of the deep stream, wading in when he saw she was too far away to reach his hand.

"Here, stay calm," he cautioned, grabbing her under the arms. "I've got you!"

As he pulled her out she sputtered, spitting out a mouthful of water. "Deep. I couldn't reach you," she gasped. "Lots of rain."

"You're all right now."

She shivered, the wet clothes clinging to her young body. "I thought you were—" she began, then stopped.

"I'll drive you home," Brad decided. He could hardly leave

her there, soaked to the skin. "Where do you live?"

"The—the next house down the lane. Brook Manor."

She was in her mid-twenties, he guessed, maybe a bit more. Her dirty blonde hair, soaked and clinging to her scalp, went well with her pale blue eyes and fair complexion. "We've got to get you out of those wet clothes before you catch a chill."

"What about you?" she asked as he led her to his car. "You're as soaked as I am."

For the first time he realized she spoke the truth. His clothes were wet through, and his shoes were still filled with water. "I guess I should have removed some of these things first," he admitted, "but I never thought of it. You looked like you were drowning."

"And well I might have if it hadn't been for you. I don't even know your name, and you saved my life."

"It's Brad. Bradford Dillon."

"Do you live around here?"

"London, actually. I'm on holiday." He got her into the car trying not to think of the water spots on his seats, and went around to the driver's side.

"I'm terribly sorry to have disrupted it."

"Not at all! Rescuing you is the most useful thing I've done

in months. Just why did you jump in, though? I wasn't going to hit you." He started down the road in the direction he'd been traveling.

"I thought you were someone else," she responded, trying to dry her hair with the cloth he'd handed her from the back seat.

"Was someone chasing you?"

"It's a long story," she answered dismissively. "Here's where you turn in."

A wooden gate stood open in a hedge, and down a gravel road he could see a moderate-sized country house. One wing seemed to have been added in recent years, throwing off the symmetry of the place with its distinctive Cotswolds architecture. "It's a lovely house," he told her.

"We like it. Oh, I'm Barbara, by the way. Barbara Stafford. You can pull up right by the front door. And you must come in to dry those wet clothes."

"Well—" In truth, he was feeling damp and uncomfortable. "Just for a few minutes."

A tall handsome man with a neat mustache and a military gait came around the corner of the house just then. "Barbara! I've been looking all over for you. What in hell happened to your hair? Why, you're soaked to the skin!"

"I fell in the brook, Hugh. This man was good enough to

pull me out. Mr. Dillon, this is my brother Hugh."

"Hugh Gatewood," the slender man said, extending a hand. "But you're soaked, too. Please come in."

Brad followed them through the front door and into a cosy room with a fireplace he wished was in use. "Get out of those wet clothes," Barbara Stafford told him. "I'll give you one of my husband's robes to wear, and we'll run them through the dryer for you."

"Thanks. That would feel good," Brad admitted.

She went off to get the robe, and Hugh Gatewood sat down by the window. "You must tell me how all of this came about, Mr. Dillon."

"Well, I think I startled her with my car. She went over the bridge wall and into the brook, which seems quite deep right now."

"Rain," Hugh Gatewood muttered, "lots of rain. Damned English summers getting worse all the time." But his mind didn't seem to be on the words. Instead he glanced toward the door as if awaiting his sister's return.

She was back in a moment, holding out a red silk robe for Brad. She'd doffed her own soggy garments and was wearing a white robe with a Chinese dragon entwined over the left

breast. "You can use the bedroom at the top of the stairs," she told him. "That's for guests."

He went up the stairs and found the room she'd indicated. Its big double bed with a down comforter dominated the small space. The walls were hung with hunting prints, and out the window he could see the rolling hills of the Cotswolds gradually fading in the twilight. Wrapping the bathrobe snugly around him, Brad was starting back down the stairs when he heard a new voice from below.

"...doing in that robe? Where are your clothes?"

"I fell in the brook, and a passing motorist rescued me. He's upstairs now. I told him we'd dry out his clothes."

"Fell in the brook?" The voice was deep and uncomprehending.

Barbara Stafford mumbled something he couldn't catch. He went on downstairs, holding his wet clothes in a ball. A large balding man turned toward him with a frown. "You're the gentleman who rescued my wife?"

"That's correct. I'm Bradford Dillon."

"Major George Stafford, retired. Thank you for your services."

Brad's immediate thought was that Major George Stafford was a pompous ass, but that didn't concern him much. He'd be on his way again within an hour. Then he turned and glimpsed the fear on Barbara's face. She was afraid of her husband, and he realized that she'd been running from him when she jumped over the railing of that bridge.

"Your clothes should be dry shortly," Barbara said, returning to the room. She'd changed from the robe into a pair of slacks and a blouse, perhaps at her husband's urging.

Almost immediately they were interrupted by a small man with a pale complexion. "Major Stafford, you're wanted on the phone."

"Is that a butler?" Brad asked Barbara.

"No, we don't have any live-in help. That's Walter Harp. He's helping my husband with his book."

"A military memoir?"

She laughed. "He's done those. This one is about a murder case in Glasgow."

Presently the major and Walter Harp returned, and Barbara's brother brought out a decanter of sherry. "Ah, the nightly ritual!" Walter Harp exclaimed. Brad and Barbara declined, but the other three

had a glass, draining the decanter.

"I'll have to open a new bottle tomorrow," Hugh Gatewood said.

Brad tried to engage Major Stafford in conversation. "This is lovely country. I'm driving through on my summer holiday."

"It is quite pretty," the major agreed.

"Do you and your wife ride much, or hunt?"

"We shoot birds. She's good at it, better than me." He took a sip of sherry. "Where was it you found her this evening?"

"That stone bridge over the brook. I rounded a bend in the road, and my car must have startled her. She went over the edge into the water."

"Odd. The bridge is plenty wide enough."

Barbara came over to join the conversation. "The car frightened me," she explained simply.

Her husband grunted and shifted the conversation to Brad's job in London. "It must be a rat-race there, isn't it? I much prefer to work on my writing at home."

"It does get one down at times," Brad admitted.

Later, when the other three were conversing out of earshot, he asked Barbara, "Why do you fear your husband?"

"Does it show?"

"To me it does. You jumped off the bridge because you thought he was after you."

She stared down at the floor as if afraid to meet his eyes. "It's a personal matter. I can't talk about it."

"Does he hit you?" Brad asked, remembering some military types he'd known.

She watched her husband and Harp leave the room. "I really can't talk about it. Please don't ask me."

Her brother finished his sherry and went in search of something stronger. "I'll be back," he promised.

Walter Harp had reentered the room, moving so silently that Brad barely heard his approach. He was young, slender, and pale, almost anemic. "The major is sorry, but he'll be occupied for the rest of the evening, Barbara. He sends his regrets. He'd be very pleased if Mr. Dillon could spend the night with us in the guest room."

"Oh, I'm afraid I couldn't—"

"Please do!" Barbara Stafford urged. "He so rarely invites anyone to stay over. He must like you."

"I'd planned to find a bed and breakfast place closer to Cheltenham—"

"We have both bed and breakfast, and it won't cost you a thing!"

She seemed genuinely sincere. "Well, it is getting late—"

"Good! I'll bring your clothes up to the guest room." As her brother returned she said, "Bradford has agreed to spend the night with us. He'll be using the guest room."

Hugh Gatewood turned his gray eyes on Brad. "I hope you have a peaceful night's sleep."

The guest room bed was softer than Brad was used to, and he tossed restlessly during the early hours of the night. Once he got up and walked to the window, which looked out on the front of the house. He could make out a reflected glow off to his left. Apparently lights still burned in that newer wing he'd noticed on arrival. Perhaps Major Stafford and Walter Harp were still working on the book, whatever it was.

He'd just gotten back into bed, beginning to regret his decision to remain overnight, when he heard a soft knock on the door. He opened it a crack and saw Barbara Stafford standing there in her robe. Any assumption he might have made about a sexual encounter was dispelled by her first words. "I need your help!"

"What is it?"

"George hasn't come up to bed yet. He never works this late. I'm afraid something's

wrong. Could you go down with me to see?"

"Isn't your brother—"

"Hugh's probably drunk in his room by now, like every other night."

Brad slipped on the robe over his underwear and followed her to the stairs. "Does he have a study where he works?"

She nodded, her face pale in the semidarkness. "It's in the north wing, this way."

They went downstairs together. Barbara, more familiar with her house by night, moved swiftly and steadily. Brad followed a bit more gingerly, careful not to trip over anything. Once they'd reached the ground floor there was more light, coming from an open doorway at the end of a corridor. "That's the library," she said, barely above a whisper.

Brad saw a man's foot in the lighted doorway and shielded Barbara's eyes. "You'd better not look."

"What is it?"

"I'm not sure."

He moved into the shaft of light and stared down at the man's body. He was young, sandy-haired, and dressed in a black sweatshirt and pants. A deep gash in his throat had been caused by a bayonet that lay next to the body.

"Tell me!" she begged. "Is it—George?"

"I've never seen him before. He's young, with blond hair."

There was a gasp, and he turned in time to catch her as she fainted.

After that it was a matter of phoning the local police and rousing everyone from their sleep. This proved easy to do. Hugh Gatewood, looking somehow military even in slumber, had fallen asleep in his chair before a tumbler half full of scotch. Major Stafford was finally located in a den adjoining the library, asleep in a big lounge chair. There was no sign of Walter Harp, who'd apparently left earlier.

"You know the dead man, don't you?" Dillon asked Barbara Stafford as they waited for the police.

"He's someone from town, a chap named Ross Tager. I met him through my brother."

"What would he have been doing here in the middle of the night?"

She looked away. "I have no idea."

The police arrived then, putting a quick end to the conversation. The local constable was a hoarse-voiced man named Melrose, with beefy cheeks and graying hair. "Could he have been breaking into your house, ma'am?" he asked respectfully.

"I doubt it. We knew him quite well. He would have been welcome here any time."

"Even in the middle of the night?"

"Well, yes," she answered with a touch of uncertainty.

Constable Melrose turned to Brad. "And you were just spending the night here, sir?"

He retold the story of pulling Barbara Stafford from the flooded brook. "I'm planning to leave in the morning."

"Afraid I'll have to ask you to stay a bit longer than that, Mr. Dillon. With a case like this we may ask Scotland Yard to send someone to help us. In that case, he'd want to talk to you."

"I'm on holiday," Brad answered a bit uncertainly.

"Oh, it shouldn't delay you more than a day. Then you could be on your way. Meanwhile, I'd like to get preliminary statements from everyone here."

Brad could see there'd be little sleep that night. He was sent into the drawing room to await his turn at questioning. He hadn't been there before and he passed a few moments looking over the pictures of the Gatewood family. There were framed photographs of Barbara and her brother as teenagers, trophies from school, Barbara's cups for swimming and lawn tennis, Hugh's military medals

from the Falklands, and a large oil painting of their parents seated with them at a table. For the first time it occurred to Brad that this was the Gate-wood family home and Major Stafford was the intruder.

"Mr. Dillon? What's happened here?"

He turned at the sound of his name, expecting to see one of the uniformed policemen. Instead he saw Walter Harp, small and pale, his suit rumpled as if he'd slept in it.

"Where were you?" he asked. "They thought you'd gone home."

"I started home but had to pull over and doze for a bit. The wine gets to me sometimes. One of the constables found me and told me to come back here."

"A man's been killed. He was a fellow from town named Ross Tager."

"Tager! How did it happen?"

"They don't know. He was found in the library with a throat wound. There's some speculation he'd broken into the house."

"How's Barbara taking it?"

"She fainted when we found the body, but she seems all right now. I'm waiting to make a statement to the local constable."

"I expect that's what they want me for, too. I'd much

rather curl up and go back to sleep."

"You're a writer?" Brad asked, still a bit vague as to Harp's position in the household.

"A journalist, really. I was with the *Telegraph* until last year. Now I suppose I'm something of a ghostwriter. Right now I'm helping the major with a book. Since his retirement, he's taken an interest in writing, and true crime is very popular right now with publishers, especially if there's a bit of sensationalism involved."

"Which case is he writing about?"

"Oh, that would be telling," Walter Harp answered slyly. Brad had the impression that a bit of urging would have brought it out, but he really wasn't all that interested.

A policeman called his name, and he was summoned into the library with its collection of military weapons. "I'll keep this short in view of the hour," Constable Melrose told him. "Your name is Bradford Dillon?"

"That's correct." He was relieved to see that the body was gone.

"You live and work in London?"

"Right. I'm an investment banker with Chase Lionheart Ltd."

"Are you married?"

"No."

"Please repeat what you told me earlier about rescuing Mrs. Stafford."

"I was driving through shortly after dinner when I came upon Mrs. Stafford on the road. The sight of my car seemed to startle her, and she fell over the bridge into the brook. The water's quite high because of the rains, and she couldn't get to shore. I went in after her."

"You rescued her?"

"In a manner of speaking. We were both soaked, of course, and when I brought her back here, she invited me in while she dried my clothes. By that time it was getting dark, and her husband suggested I spend the night."

"I understand you found the body," he said, making a note on the pad before him.

"That's right. Mrs. Stafford was concerned when her husband didn't come up to bed. She knocked on my door and asked me to go downstairs with her. We found the body together."

"And she fainted."

"Well, I assume her first thought was that it could be her husband. And then there was the blood—"

"Why had Major Stafford remained downstairs at bedtime?"

"Apparently he's writing a book with Walter Harp. They were working on it."

Melrose nodded. "We found a number of typed pages. Do you know what it's about?"

"Some sort of true crime case, I gather."

"Exactly." He placed his hand upon some typed sheets. "I'll let you retire now, Mr. Dillon. I'm sure we'll have more questions in the morning."

On his way out Brad passed a pale Major Stafford, waiting his turn at questioning. He looked through Brad as if he no longer remembered who he was.

Barbara's brother Hugh Gatewood was alone in the kitchen, where Brad went for a glass of water before returning to bed. He seemed to have recovered from the effects of his drunken stupor. "Been questioned yet?" Brad asked.

He nodded. "First one." He moved away from the counter, and Brad saw the bottle of stout behind him. "Just a nip before bedtime. Want one?"

"No, thanks."

"It's a shame about old Tager. Maybe he got mistaken for a burglar, dressed all in black like that."

"Mistaken by whom?"

Gatewood smiled slyly. "My brother-in-law. The major."

That was one of the bayonets from his collection."

"I didn't notice."

"They're on the wall in the library—everything from cavalry swords to commando knives."

"Why would Major Stafford want to kill this man Tager?"

"Why indeed?" He finished his stout and placed the bottle on the counter. "Well, off to bed again. We'll see you in the morning, Mr. Dillon."

By the time Brad climbed back into the guest room bed it was almost five A.M. But this time, at least, he went right to sleep.

A cook came in each morning to prepare breakfast, and she greeted Brad when he ventured downstairs around nine. "I'm Sadie."

She was a pleasant looking middle-aged woman. "Are the others up yet?" he asked.

"No, sir. Mrs. Stafford left me a note saying they'd be sleeping late. They told me in the village what happened here. Are you a relative?"

"Only an overnight guest. Did you know the victim, Sadie?"

"Mr. Tager? Everyone knew him. He was quite the man with the ladies."

"Oh? A bachelor?"

"Yes, sir. He was an estate manager for some of the families in the area. The girls all liked him."

"You too?"

She blushed a bit. "Oh, not me, sir. The younger ones. I'll be a grandmother in a few months."

"You certainly don't look it."

She brought him a glass of orange juice with scrambled eggs and bacon. "Will you be wanting toast with that?"

"Thank you, yes. And coffee."

Peering out the window, she announced, "Here comes the chief constable."

"Again? He was here half the night."

"Constable Melrose is a very diligent man."

She opened the kitchen door and greeted him. He smiled when he saw her. "Hello, Sadie. How's the family?"

"Just fine. My daughter will be having her baby in November."

"That's good." He turned his attention to Brad. "Sleep well, Mr. Dillon?"

"When I finally got back to bed. Any idea when I'll be able to leave here?"

"Oh, it shouldn't take too long. I might be able to wrap this up without any help from the Yard."

"Really? Do you think he was killed breaking into the house?"

"There's no evidence of a break-in, and no one's come forward to offer that as a reason for killing him. Still, there are interesting angles."

Major Stafford appeared, fully dressed in a business suit and carrying a briefcase. "Just some coffee, please, Sadie. Well, I see the police are on the job early. Or didn't you ever leave, constable?"

"I went home for a few hours." He motioned toward the briefcase. "I wasn't aware that you went to the office, major."

"I have a business meeting this morning. It couldn't be changed." He stood at the kitchen counter, drinking his cup of coffee with undue haste. "Walter Harp tells me you took the manuscript of the book we're working on. May I ask why?"

"Just wanted some bedtime reading. I'll return it to you as soon as possible."

"Bedtime—"

"It's a police case. I like to see how other investigations are carried out."

Major Stafford finished his coffee. "The Earlings case up in Glasgow hardly seems one that would interest you."

"A husband shoots his wife's lover and claims he mistook him for a burglar? There's something universal about it,

don't you think? I imagine things like that happen everywhere."

"I must be off," Stafford said with a wave of his hand. "Let me know if I can be of further help with your investigation."

Brad watched him leave by the kitchen door and walk quickly to his black Mercedes parked in the driveway. As he drove away from the house, Chief Constable Melrose remarked, "He's an odd duck. Retired from the army, wrote a few military histories, and now turns to true crime books. Likes the killing, I suppose."

"What does he need Walter Harp for?"

"I gather Harp writes the finished product from Stafford's rough draft, though he's only credited as a research assistant. They've been mildly successful."

"The major has a young wife."

"Yes, he does. Barbara Stafford must find the nights a bit lonely when her husband is working on a book."

"You seem to be implying something about her and the murdered man."

"It's no secret they knew and liked one another. Ross Tager had a certain inescapable charm."

"Do you think the major killed him?"

"It seems that someone in this house must have—the major or his wife or her brother. Or you, Mr. Dillon."

"Me!"

He shrugged. "A possibility. Walter Harp is a possibility too, of course, though I can think of no likely motive for either of you."

Another police car pulled up, and Brad saw they were technical people carrying knapsacks and cameras. Melrose went to meet them, and they all trooped into the library. Brad finished his breakfast and decided to stroll in the garden.

He found Barbara Stafford there, wearing a wide-brimmed sun hat, pruning dead roses from the bushes. "Hello," he greeted her. "Don't you eat breakfast?"

"I saw my husband in the kitchen with you and decided to pass it by."

"Aren't you two speaking?"

"He slept in a spare bedroom last night. I don't know what the situation is." She turned her eyes toward him, full of appeal. "Right now I'm afraid for my life."

"Yesterday, when I found you—"

"George had hit me, knocked me down. I ran from the house and across the fields, afraid he would kill me. When I saw your car, I thought it was him. God!

I was trying to kill myself when I leapt off that bridge and into the brook."

"But you cried for help."

"I suppose anyone would have, in those circumstances. I swallowed water and felt myself going down."

"Did he say anything to you afterward?"

"He called me foolish. That was all. I'd run away to escape a beating, and he called me foolish."

Brad paused a moment before asking the question. "Do you know what Ross Tager was doing here last night?"

"I phoned him, asked him to come. I needed someone."

"He was a close friend?"

She looked away, embarrassed. "Very close, yes."

"Do you think your husband killed him?"

"Who else could it have been?"

"He and Harp are writing a book about a similar case, you know: a Glasgow husband who mistook his wife's lover for a burglar."

"Ross was no burglar."

"How did he enter the house?"

"I don't know. Through the french windows in the library, I suppose. That's where he was killed."

"When you came to my room during the night, you weren't

worried about your husband, were you? He often slept in the spare bedroom."

She turned toward him, almost touching him. "I'd heard Ross's car drive up and park on the road about fifteen minutes earlier. When he didn't come up, I was afraid something had happened to him. That's why I came to you."

"The chief constable suspects your husband," Brad told her. "What about your brother? Did he resent Major Stafford's marrying you and moving into the Gatewood family home?"

"I suppose he might have. Obviously it would have been easier if he'd moved, but he stayed on. Still, it's a big house—big enough for three people."

Brad could see the constable coming across the lawn toward them. "Mrs. Stafford," he called. "Could you assist us for a moment, please?"

"Certainly, constable. What is it?"

"The victim apparently entered those french windows. Were they kept locked at night?"

"Usually, but I'm afraid my husband is a bit lax in those matters. He might have fallen asleep and left them unlocked or even ajar."

He nodded. "I hope we don't inconvenience you much longer, Mrs. Stafford. We should

conclude our investigation this afternoon."

"That would be most gratifying."

"I'll be able to leave then?" Brad asked.

"I expect so, Mr. Dillon."

Brad knew he intended to arrest Stafford for the murder of his wife's lover. An hour later, when he saw the major return in his car, he thought of something that hadn't occurred to him earlier.

Walter Harp had returned to the house after lunch, ready to work with Major Stafford on the book. Hugh Gatewood was in the drawing room, already sampling the sherry. Although the police technicians had completed their work and departed, Chief Constable Melrose was still on the scene. Brad had spoken with him earlier, and now as he browsed alone in the library, looking over the major's weapons collection, he wondered what had become of Melrose.

He was running his fingers gently over the place on the felt backing where the bayonet had rested when Barbara entered the room. "The constable says you can go whenever you wish, though he may need your testimony if there's a trial."

"Certainly," Brad said. "Is he going to arrest your husband?"

"I think so." She walked to the weapons collection and touched several of the blades in turn. "I hate the thought of going through it all."

Brad nodded. "Be assured that your secret is safe with me."

She looked up sharply, startled at his words. "What secret? Do you mean my friendship with Ross Tager?"

"No, I mean your murder of Ross Tager."

"Surely you must be jesting!" she responded, but he saw the color drain from her face.

"No. No, I don't believe I am. You see, when I really noticed your husband's car today—that big black Mercedes—I realized that you never could have mistaken my little red Audi for it. The business about running from your husband was a lie, just as the attempted suicide was a lie. You have swimming trophies in the next room."

"Perhaps I just wanted some male companionship."

"I'm sure you did. You wanted someone who would be forced to remain here while his clothes dried. When you suggested to your husband that I be invited to spend the night, of course he extended the invitation. Why did you want me here last night? Certainly not for romance. You needed something else. You needed an impartial

witness, someone who could come downstairs here and find the body with you."

"You're forgetting that Ross Tager was my close friend, perhaps even my lover."

"And friend and lover to several others, from what I hear. I think your jealousy finally got the better of you and you arranged to kill him in a way that could point the finger of guilt at your husband. That part wasn't crucial to your plan, but it was a nice extra bonus if it worked out that way."

"Just what was my so-called plan?" she asked.

"You phoned Tager, told him you needed him to protect you from your husband. He drove out here last night and came through the open french windows of the library, where you were waiting with that bayonet. You killed him and then went upstairs to get me. You needed a witness, as I've said, and who else was there—a drunken brother? The servants didn't sleep over, Walter Harp would be gone by that time, and you wanted the major as a suspect, not as a witness. So it had to be an outsider like me."

"What was my husband doing through all this?"

Brad smiled slightly. "Sleeping in the den. Just as brother Hugh was drunkenly asleep in his room and Walter Harp was

dozing by the side of the road on the way home. It was too much of a coincidence that those three men would fall asleep almost simultaneously. I was pacing the floor at the time, unable to sleep at all, and you were obviously awake, too. Then I remembered Hugh's bottle of sherry, which you and I declined but the other three drank from. You'd drugged it, of course, so the major would be sleeping when you killed Ross Tager. Ideally, he'd have fallen asleep in the library where he'd been working, and awakened to find the body himself. When that didn't happen you brought me down as planned, to serve as the impartial witness. Walter Harp called the sherry a nightly ritual. You knew they'd all have a drink. But what if I'd asked for sherry, too?"

She turned to look away. "There was only enough for three glasses in the decanter. I'd have used that as an excuse to open a new bottle and serve you first. Then I'd have poured the other glasses from the decanter." She whirled around. "Anything to kill Ross?"

He saw the black commando knife in her hand and he knew how Ross Tager must have felt in the instant before he died.

"Grab her!" Melrose shouted as he came through the door from the drawing room. The other constable wrenched at her wrist as she swung the blade, missing Brad by inches.

"I wondered what you were waiting for," he muttered to Melrose.

"I couldn't go on your theory alone," the constable told him, bringing out the handcuffs. "I needed an admission from her."

Brad sat down for a moment to control his trembling. He wasn't used to this sort of thing. Then, as Barbara Stafford was being led away, he stood again and asked her, "What would you have done if I hadn't stopped the car and pulled you out of the brook?"

She turned her eyes toward him, and he could see the desperate madness of a woman scorned by her lover. "I had dry clothes hidden in the bushes," she answered calmly. "You were the sixth man I tried. The first five didn't stop."

Dead in His Own Back Yard

by Robert Halsted



“How can you stand to just stand there and *look* at it?” asked Alice, daring to sound a bit plaintive.

“Started toughening myself up when I was a kid. Rode a

bike all over the place. Saw a lot of roadkill up close. Armadillos were the worst. Though not this bad.”

I looked again at Calvin’s bloodshot eyes popped halfway out of his head by a softnose

.357 slug coming from behind. It was a right gruesome sight, particularly with the extensive nosebleed. It needed wiping badly, but I figured that would have been tampering with evidence.

"You know—" I began, and stopped.

"I know what?" asked Alice.

"Never mind. I was about to say something tasteless."

She sighed. "It wouldn't be the first tasteless thing that's happened lately."

I glanced back at the corpse, too brightly displayed in the slanting back yard floodlight. "What I was thinking was, he looks like those decals they put on hot rods and things. With those red eyeballs sticking out."

"Yeurkh. That's not tasteless, it's gross."

"Sorry."

"That's okay. We're both under stress." She sighed again. "I'd better get back to the children."

As she started toward the house I said, "Maybe you'd better call 911."

"I was expecting Ms. Simmons to call." Ms. Simmons called applicable public service agencies at the drop of a hanky: fire, trash, police, welfare. Even the Garden Tour Committee one time about ragweed on the city right-of-way. Ever

since she'd called the 1-800 abuse number on Calvin about his wife and kids, she'd been finding uprooted flowers in the garden, dog droppings on her front porch, a deliberate short in her TV cable. Things like that.

"Look better if you called them, too, now that you've recovered from the shock."

She nodded in weary assent and went on to the house in a tired, spaced-out way that seemed half floating and half dragging. I looked down at Calvin's remains again. I figured the reason his eyes hadn't popped all the way out was that it relieved the pressure when all the blood and goo squirted out of his ears. If I hadn't spent a long time training myself to be macho and stoic, I would have considered being ill on the grass, what there was of it. I felt pale and queasy. From the sight of Calvin and other valid considerations.

The night was so quiet I could hear not only Alice and the children talking indoors, but neighbors across the back easement. Two or three houses had lit up by now. I stood there on the mostly-bare-dirt lawn, smelling the doggie-doo I'd stepped in. It fitted right in with the whole scene.

Then I heard the sirens approaching. That surprised me

till I realized the ambulance would make noise even if the police tried to sneak up quietly. The red lights arrived first, splash-painting house walls as the spotlight probed for street numbers, then a moment later the blue ones sweeping slightly off-level swatches across the red. I was surprised again that where they crossed the effect was sort of pinkish-white instead of purple.

The gate was open. I walked to it and shouted, "Back this way. In the back yard." After a brief confusion, two paramedics jogged in toting equipment and, right behind them, a cop with drawn gun. The question crossed my mind as to how safe that was, in case he considered firing at someone beyond them. The medics—a beefy guy and a girl a foot shorter—saw the corpse shining in the floodlight and ran toward it. The young cop made a sort of retching sound and proceeded more slowly. I wondered how the medics, with their difference in height, could carry a stretcher level.

Looking anywhere but at the body, the cop shone his five-cell flashlight around and was rewarded by the glint of metal. "Here's the gun!" he exclaimed as another cop, a sergeant, hustled into the yard. He started to reach for it.

"Hold it," said the sergeant. "Let's let the detective division handle it."

By now neighbors were drifting in, coming through my yard and peeking through the gate of Calvin's eight-foot cypress fence. Another cop appeared from somewhere to ride herd on them.

The sergeant raised his voice. "Anybody touch the body?"

I hesitantly raised my hand. "I, uh, turned him over. To see how badly he was injured. Before I realized that . . ." I faded away.

"So he was facedown when you found him?" I nodded, and so did the cop, now that the explanation of his position was in place. "Okay, let's all you folks that saw or heard anything come on in. Detectives will be here in a minute."

A few minutes later we were all sitting in the fusty living room. Calvin had had a thing about keeping sunlight off the furniture and never let Alice open the curtains, even the windows, most days. There were half a dozen of us from the neighborhood and three or four assorted lawfolk, depending on when you counted. Alice had a child on each knee. Solemn-faced William was eight, shy

but sweet Priscilla was five going on six.

The presiding detective, a lieutenant named Weiser, spoke to Alice. "Mrs., uh, Durrence. This might be a little upsetting for the children, the questions we'll have to ask."

The kids shrank back against Alice, and she wrapped her arms around them. "They want to be with me, mister, officer..." He gave her his rank and name again. "They know he's dead. He wasn't their real father."

"Okay," he said dubiously. "If they get upset, somebody'll have to take them out of the room. Now, who found him?" he asked the uniformed sergeant. I heard the words "Woody Allen" in the mumbled response, not a new experience for me. Weiser turned to me and asked me to give my name and tell the story in my own words.

Omitting pauses and uh's, I answered: "Well, my name is Albert Elkin, E-l-k-i-n. I was in bed and something sort of half woke me up, y'know, like sometimes in the night?" He nodded. "Well, I thought I heard a kind of scuffling noise, like maybe someone in the yard. I thought of getting up to check on it and decided not to. I was almost back to sleep when I heard a gunshot. A bigger gunshot than usual, like—"

"Bigger than *usual*?"

Betty Willingham, the widow who lived directly behind the Durrence house, interjected, "He does, did a lot of shooting. Prowlers, and—and *animals*." Her missing white Persian had been tossed into her back yard one day, shot dead with a high-powered air-gun. Nothing could ever be proved. Weiser looked at the sergeant, who nodded and mumbled.

"Oh," said Weiser. Then turning back to me, "Go on, Mr. Elkin. You were saying, a *bigger* gunshot than usual?"

"Yes, well, it seemed unusually loud. Maybe just because it was so quiet that time of night. It sounded almost like a small shotgun."

"So you went out to check?"

I shook my head vigorously. "Nn-uh. I don't like to get anywhere near him when he's, when he was shooting."

"But you found the body, or did I get that wrong?"

"No, I was the first one to *get* there. But I didn't go out till the floodlight went on and I heard Alice, Mrs. Durrence, scream. Then I put on a robe and ran out." I realized with surprise that I was still clad in slippers and robe.

Weiser turned to Alice. "Would you tell us what led up to that, Mrs. Durrence?"

She blinked, swallowed, nodded, caught her voice. "Calvin, my husband, woke me getting out of bed. He said there was someone in the back yard."

I had an excuse now to look right at Alice. The bruise on her cheekbone from Calvin's last rage was almost gone. I remembered when they had first moved in, nearly six years ago now. Her first husband had skipped soon after she got pregnant with Priscilla. Desperate for security—Billy was turning three and a handful, a friendly bouncy kid then—she married an older man, who turned out to be Calvin. Except for the pregnancy that was nearly as big as she was, she was a wispy waify wraithy little pale blonde who made me feel massive and muscular, or at least a lot less shrimp. Since then the little bit of sunshine in her face had gone dark, and Billy turned far too sober for his age. He and Priscilla came straight home from a denominational school and weren't allowed to play with neighborhood kids.

"I didn't hear your dog bark," said Tammy Rockwitz. She and Jack lived right behind me, cat-cornered to the Durrences. "I usually do." We all did, most nights and some days.

Calvin, who had been an inspector for Code Enforcement, had cost the Rockwitzes nearly

three grand the summer before when they had a building party one weekend and put a fiberglass roof over their patio. They'd had to tear it down, pay a fine, apply for a permit, and pay an architectural engineer to approve their plans before they could redo exactly what they'd undone, except with leaks the second time. He gave me a nasty little citation for a rotten fascia board on the blind corner of the roof (he'd had to trespass to see it) and had sniped at other neighbors in similar ways.

"Somebody poisoned Bruto a few nights ago," Alice said in response to Tammy's comment about the dog. There was a palpable cheering up of the company.

"Oh," commented the sergeant. "That's the one got loose and bit a kid last year." That was the one, all right. To the tune of twelve or fourteen stitches, and the kid still had a scar on his cheek. Billy and Priscilla played indoors or on the front porch since they weren't safe from the pit bull/Dobie cross in their own back yard.

"So, then," prompted Lieutenant Weiser, "your husband went out to check on a prowler?" Alice nodded. "He took a gun?"

"I'm sure he did. I didn't see it, but he always did."

"Where did he keep his gun, by the bed?"

She shook her head. "Sometimes he keeps, kept one there at night. There's a whole room full of them. He probably took one of those."

"Any guns missing?"

Alice shook her head. "I couldn't say. He didn't want me around the guns, I didn't want around them. They're in the back room down the hall." She gestured with her head. "There's a catch up at the top to keep the kids out."

Weiser semaphored a message to the sergeant with his chin and eyebrows, and the sergeant went back to check. "Now, let's get back to your story, Mr., uh, Elkin. You heard Mrs. Durrence scream, so you ran over here?" I nodded. "So, when you got here..."

I cleared my throat. "Well, the floodlight was on, so I ran in through the back gate. That's at the corner of the fence nearest my house. And, well, there he was, just like you saw him. Except of course I turned him over. He didn't—well, he didn't look as badly injured as he was, from the back." I shuddered.

"Back up a minute. You ran in the gate? It was open?"

I was silent for just the right length of time. "Well, yes. I mean, it didn't register on me at the time. He usually keeps it locked."

"There's a big bolt on the inside," Alice added.

The room was silent as Weiser scribbled notes. I could hear a mockingbird down the street, and what I assumed was a forensic team moving and talking in the back.

"Anybody else notice anything significant?" Weiser inquired, scanning the group with his eyes.

Ms. Simmons half raised her hand. "Well, the shot woke me. It sounded like right outside my bedroom window."

"And you live..."

"Right next door. Other side from Albert. So I sat up in bed. I heard some sounds I couldn't identify, then somebody running across my back yard. And there was a clattering noise, like they'd stumbled over a lawn chair, and I *thought* I heard a man swear. But I didn't go out, of course."

Weiser nodded and thanked her, then turned to Alice. "Did you go out, Mrs. Durrence?"

Alice shook her head and shuddered. "Nn-nh. No. When Calvin didn't come back in after a few minutes, I got worried. So I went to the kitchen and turned on the floodlight.

The kitchen door was open, and I looked out and, and saw the, the *body*." She gave a convulsive shudder. The rings under her eyes were dark, and she looked near the end of her endurance. I found myself playing with words: the end of her duration, the end of her Durrence. She went on: "That's when I screamed. I guess Albert, Mr. Elkin, came just a little after that. I wasn't, well, quite *conscious*. I mean, my mind stopped registering things for a minute." She swallowed, blinked her eyes and put her face in her hands.

Weiser turned back to me. "So, let's see, where were we with your end of the story? You ran over, came in the gate and saw the body."

I cleared my throat again. "Yes. Well, I ran over to the body. Funny, I thought he'd shot himself. I mean, that wasn't like him, he wasn't, I'd think, the suicidal type, but I saw him lying there and the gun a little way off, and I guess that was my automatic reaction to it. So I rolled him over, and . . . well, there was obviously nothing I could do for him. So I went to the kitchen door, and she was standing there, and I told her."

"And then?"

"Well. It was a horrible sight, but she, I guess she had to

know for sure. I guess I should have kept her from coming out." Weiser nodded, sad wisdom on his face. "So she was sort of stunned for a while, and I guess I was pretty numb, too. Then I sent her in to call 911 while I stood by the body. And you know the rest."

He finished scribbling in his notebook, closed it, and stood up. "Thank you all very much," he said, gazing round the group. "We may have more questions later. We'll try to bother you as little as possible. Mrs. Durrence, is there anybody, family or someone . . ."

"I'll be all right," she said. "I don't have any family, nobody close enough."

Betty Willingham spoke up. "I can stay over tonight. No trouble. You might could use a little help. Just give me a few minutes to get my jammies and toothbrush." Everyone stood up to go.

I volunteered to stay with Alice till Betty got back. Priscilla had gone to sleep in Alice's arms, and I carried her while Alice towed Billy, asleep on his feet, back to the kids' room. Priscilla was soft and warm in my arms. We had had a long-standing flirtation through the windows, smiling and mugging and once in a while long-dancing a good-morning kiss between her bedroom and my

kitchen, but I'd never held her before, and we'd only rarely spoken. I had been high on Calvin's list of forbiddens.

In the dark hallway after they were tucked away, I put a hand on Alice's shoulder. She turned to me and in a moment we were locked in a mutual bearhug, our mouths hungrily seeking each other. "Soon," she whispered, then added in prosaic afterthought, "You know what I've missed? Lipstick. Calvin called me a Jezebel and threw all my stuff out."

Betty arrived then; Jack Rockwitz had walked her over and waited till we answered the door. We had a brief conference, and I bade the ladies goodnight.

On the way out I passed Calvin's high-wheel four-by-four, with its three-gun window rack and four spotlights. A "God, Guns and Guts" bumper sticker on one side and on the other an Old Glory type. I'd soon see the last of that ugly beast, I thought with warm satisfaction, and never again would have to listen to the CB in it turned up full volume half the weekend. I kicked one of its oversized tires as I passed.

Actually, Calvin's offenses against me had been minor compared with what others got: some threats and a shove, petty insults and harassments, al-

ways stopping just short of anything actionable. But I could feel the pressure building, and someday in one of his drunken rages it would have blown up. Over the past several months this had become a crippling fear that dominated my life, and even though the little visits Alice and I sneaked at odd moments when he was gone had been totally innocent, seeing us together even once could have been enough to trigger him off.

And speaking of triggers.

Compulsively, like a guilty character in a Poe story, I had to go by the manhole. The lid, of course, was in place as I had left it. And no way was close to three pounds of pistol wrapped tightly in a pair of slightly powder-singed rubber gloves going to come floating up, like a tell-tale heart, through six feet of sewage. I'd gotten the idea when the Public Works people left the lid off one day. That was the worst part of the whole venture; I still shuddered with horror at the memory of thousands of cockroaches crawling around when I threw it in.

I finished my walk around the block, went home, fell into bed, and stayed awake till it started getting light in the east.

*

They were finishing up in the back yard when I woke late and went over to Alice's. The hot pink crime-scene tape had been taken down from across the gate, and there were two plain-clothes cars out front. There was no cop at the door—I hadn't known what to expect—so I knocked and helloed, and Betty called me to come on back. She was pouring me coffee at the kitchen table when I got there.

Weiser was there, looking as tired and underslept as he must have been. The women looked much better than we did. He greeted me and said, "I was just talking to the ladies. It wasn't the gun we found that did it. That must've been one of his own, just his own prints on it and the bullets inside it. The killer used a bigger one. Apparently he'd busted the gate latch and was working on the window to the gun room when Mr. Durrence came out—apparently Durrence didn't see him and headed across the yard. He might've thrown something to make a noise and plugged Durrence when he went for it." I felt my throat constricting. I was glad I didn't have to answer. That was exactly what happened.

Weiser went on, "We found where he went over the fence, he left a piece of shirt on a nail and some heavy shoeprints in

the flowerbed next door." It was hard for me not to look down at my own feet, but I didn't. He did, though. The bachelor next door is a natural suspect. But the size eights under my hundred thirty pound frame were nothing like the number twelve impressions he was saving casts of. And the shirt and shoes probably wouldn't get on the shelves at the Salvation Army store for weeks yet.

"Well, Mrs. Durrence," Weiser finished, "I have to say we're not likely to catch the guy any time soon. It looks like he was after the guns, there's a big market in stolen guns, and it's most likely a pro who doesn't make a mistake like this very often. Anyhow, we've done all we can here, so you can have your house and yard back. And the pathologist is finished, so you can go ahead with funeral plans. I'd, well, considering all, I'd suggest cremation and a memorial service."

We thanked him, shook his hand, and bade him godspeed.

The service was very low profile. Alice and the kids rode with Betty, the rest of us came on our own. A couple of other neighbors showed up, and a token contingent from his office. One florist's offering was from the neighbors, the other from his co-workers, and they both went to the Senior Citizens' Home after-

wards. We shopped around for the cheapest cremation, and since Calvin would have wanted a real hellfire, blood-and-thunder service, we ordered the most insipid generic one available. We'd suffered through enough of his preferences when he was living.

The ladies had prepared a nice collation for the wake feast, whatever you call it. The funeral baked meats. A hot and cold buffet, coffee and wine for the grownups, long-denied junk beverages for the kids. We all pigged out; even my anorectic little Alice went back for seconds and thirds.

Jack, who had a nice glow going, disappeared for a couple of minutes and came back with a magnum of reasonably decent domestic champagne. "I know it's unconventional," he said, "but in this particular case, I think we ought to toast the widow."

So we did. Health and happiness, and there wasn't an insincere slurp in the house. Alice flushed and smiled, and a little tear trickled down her cheek. She tried to speak and couldn't.

Betty Willingham took the bottle, refilled us all, and stood in the center of the room. "And let's not forget our hero, the one

who made it all possible. Albert, our liberator!"

It was my turn to blush: Alice hugged my arm and kissed my cheek. Ms. Simmons whispered loudly, "Aren't they a cute couple!," and for the first time in my life the word failed to offend me. Jack came over and shook my hand.

"I owe you an apology, lad," Jack announced in stentorian confidentiality. "When you drew the short straw, I wasn't sure you could handle the job."

"I couldn't have done it without a wonderful supporting cast. You've all been real troupers."

"Mommy," piped Priscilla, "now that we're rid of the old daddy, are you gonna get us a new one?"

"I want a better one this time," said Billy.

"I want *Albert*," Priscilla insisted, and hugged my knee. Billy grinned. We made the hug a four-way one then.

By this point Jack had reached the philosophical stage. He said, "You know, kids don't realize and appreciate all you've gone through for them till they're old enough to have their own."

Alice had her voice back now. "That's just as well, I think."

THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH

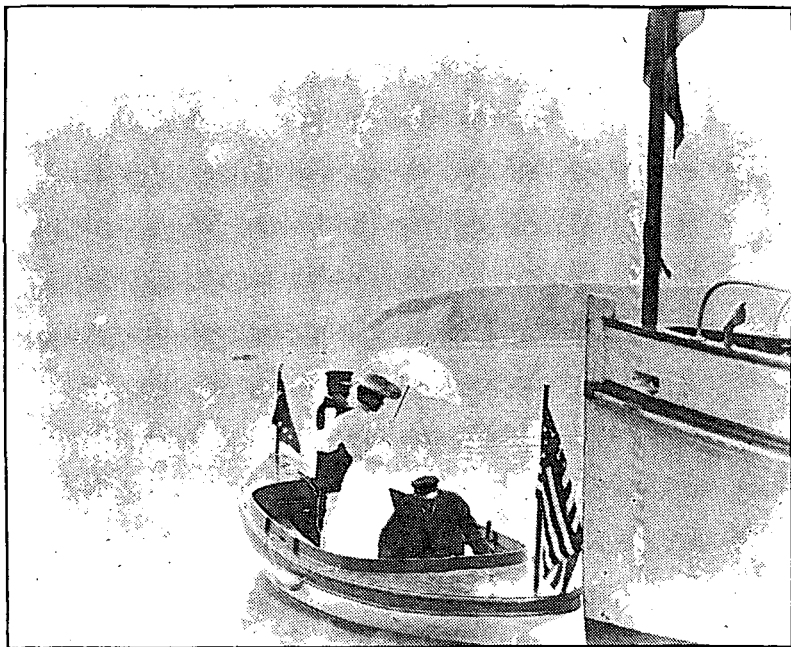


Photo by Frances Benjamin Johnston

Launching an escape? We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine, 1540 Broadway, New York, New York 10036. Please label your entry "August Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit.

The winning entry for the March Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 157.

FICTION

EENSIE- WEENSIE SPIDER

by Sybil
Baker

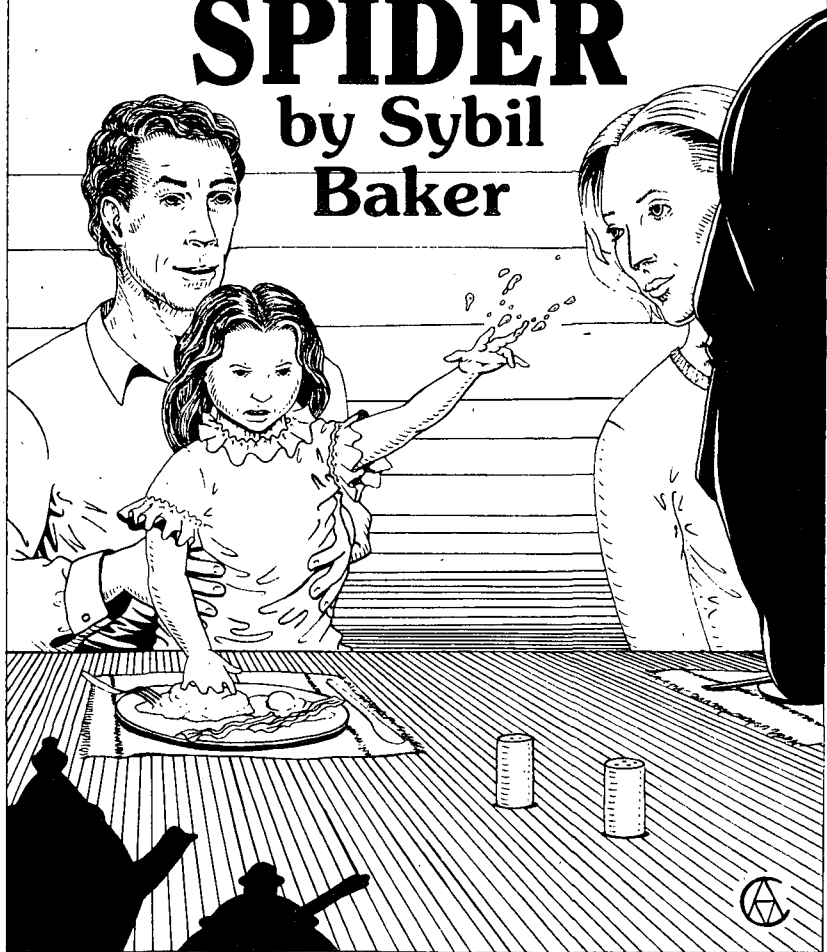


Illustration by Alan Clark

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

One snowy winter day, Valerie McKee found herself in the grip of the Antarctica of all colds, she told her husband Jack and their two teenage girls, who all urged her to call in sick at the library. "Forget the stiff upper lip, old girl," said the older daughter in a broad British accent, parodying the speech pattern that her mother had never lost. And so Valerie stayed in bed.

The bombshell dropped as she was watching the Oprah Winfrey show on TV.

The guests were self-confessed "killer tots," Oprah had explained. At four years old, a middle-aged man said laconically, he'd pushed his one-year-old stepbrother into the back yard pool and had only remembered it a year ago, during hypnotherapy. Another man, younger and much less stoic, as a two-year-old had killed his neighbor with the neighbor's own handgun.

Valerie, who found the topic disturbing, had been about to change the channel and was blowing her nose when the next guest, a beautiful young woman—poised, gentle and rueful—began to tell her story.

No, thought Valerie, it couldn't be the same person. Her eyes fixed on the screen, she sniffed and threw her wad-

ded tissue into the wastebasket. The young woman said she had pushed her nanny off a high cliff in Santa Monica, California.

Valerie gasped. Both hands flew to her mouth.

"I watched her body," the lovely young woman said, breathing hard. "It fell, and then it slid, and then it rolled, and then it fell some more, and then, in that last—the last part—it must have been about a fifty foot drop, or more, her body just plunged—to the bottom."

Oprah asked, "How old were you, Betsy?"

My God, it *was* Betsy! Valerie leaned forward.

"I was three," the young woman said. "I'm twenty-six now."

Yes, exactly. The chilling incident at the cliffs had happened twenty-three years ago, when Valerie herself had been twenty-three. But why did Betsy recall it so inaccurately? Valerie was so distraught at the idea of the young woman's years of needless suffering that she turned off the set, threw back the covers, and paced around the room. She would have to reach her, she decided, and tell her what had really happened.

Val thought about it all afternoon, shaking her head from

time to time, surprised—among other things—that Betsy had become such an attractive young woman, when she had been such a terror at three. Of course, she herself should never have taken the job. There were warning signs at the first interview. She should have gone back to London that summer, as her family there had been imploring her to do. But she had already started the summer term at Santa Monica Community College. And for the first time in her life, she was enjoying her studies; she'd become an avid scholar.

The interview with the Temples was on a Sunday early in July—"absolutely the worst possible month," the woman at the employment agency had said; everyone had already made their plans for the summer. The job at the Temples was the agency's only listing.

Before the interview, Valerie examined the Temples' house from across the street. Its location was marvelous: only a few blocks from the beach. Not only that, but a huge scarlet bougainvillea and an equally large orange-colored one frothed up the whole south side of the two story house and merged at the top in a breaking wave of riotous color. "Super," she whispered.

Her prospective employers had only one child: a little girl of three named Betsy.

Betsy's fine, shining black hair hung down to her waist. Her eyes were a deep purplish blue, with long eyelashes sweeping rose-petal cheeks. Her charming sundress was navy blue, sprigged with tiny yellow and white flowers, and almost reached her bare feet. Her neat little toes were as sweet as young peas in a pod.

"Hullo, Betsy," said Valerie with a warm smile.

The tot scowled. "Go away!" she said. She stamped one tiny bare foot. "Get out of my house! This minute!"

Betsy's mother smirked. "Isn't that something? She started speaking complete sentences when she was two."

"Amazing," Valerie said. Actually, she *was* amazed. Children usually took to her promptly.

The mother, whose name was Linda, gazed at her daughter and suggested, "Betsy, sweetie-pie, would you like to go play with Daddy while Valerie and I talk?"

"No, I wouldn't, so please don't ask me again," said Betsy. She put her little hands on her little hips and glared upward at a steep angle, and Linda laughed. This time Valerie had to laugh also: the ve-

hement response sounded so ludicrous from the exquisite little creature.

It was half past one in the afternoon, and from another room came a man's voice, yelling, "Go, go, go! All *right!*" and the roar of a crowd at a baseball game. A sportcaster's voice rose in excitement.

The mother spent five minutes explaining to Betsy why it would be such a wonderful, marvelous adventure to walk out of the room and into the den where Daddy was watching TV. Daddy would be happy to sing her a song instead of watching baseball. Maybe Daddy even had a surprise for her. Maybe Daddy missed her. Poor Daddy. Maybe Daddy was wondering if she was all right, and Betsy should go into the den and tell Daddy she was all right.

Meanwhile Valerie kept her eyes from rolling by examining the landscape above the mantel in the sunny, pleasant living room.

Betsy accepted her mother's reasoned arguments with equanimity as she enlarged the hole in a Raggedy Ann doll's tummy, plucking out the stuffing and dropping it on the carpet. Finally, Linda held up a dollar bill, which gained the tot's attention. The mother explained to her that the dollar

would be pay for an interesting little job: to go into the den and talk to Daddy.

Now the child grasped the situation—and the dollar bill—and dropped the wounded doll. But then she wanted a dollar for each hand, so Linda produced another bill, and Betsy gave her mother a beatific smile and toddled off toward the den, but before she reached the door, she extended both arms and twirled the rest of the way, rather gracefully for her age, with the dollar bills fluttering. As she continued this way through the entrance and down the hall, she laughed as melodically as a songbird at dawn.

"Betsy's ballet teacher told me that she might be the youngest child ever to be in *The Nutcracker* next Christmas," Linda said, smirking again.

If she lives, Valerie thought. "And are you going back to work, then?"

Yes, the mother explained, she had decided to return to her old job as loan officer at a bank. She said she missed the social contact and the opportunity to help people achieve their dreams in the community at large. But her pinched face had turned anxious, and she stroked the back of her neck as if soothing a treasured pet. Linda's hair, unlike her daugh-

ter's, was very fair and straight, cut shorter at the back than at the sides.

Blonde mother, darkhaired daughter, Valerie noted. Chances were the father would also have dark hair, according to Mendel's law. And so it proved a moment later when Thomas Temple crawled into the room, with Betsy riding on his back and sharply pulling first one, then the other ear, as she indicated which way to turn. His hair was quite black, in fact, and rather wavy, and he grinned as he offered a paw (as he put it) to shake hands.

After that, Betsy showed off for a while and eventually collapsed at their feet and went to sleep on the rug. Tom knelt by her side, one finger on his lips, before he slid his hands under her small body and lifted her. He staggered to his feet in the effort, and gave another huge dazed grin when he managed to stand upright without the child's eyes opening, as if he couldn't believe his luck. Then he carried her upstairs.

Linda, holding Valerie's resume, immediately turned businesslike and wanted to know all about Valerie's last job and why she'd left it. Valerie explained that her employers, who also were British, had moved from Santa Monica to New York. They had implored

her to accompany them, but Valerie felt it prudent not to interrupt her studies. She explained that she was crashing at the moment with her best friend from school, Gloria, but didn't want to impose too long.

Linda inquired about Valerie's salary at the last job and raised her eyebrows at the reply. "I think you were underpaid, frankly," she said, "especially if you had to take care of three children."

Valerie paused. "That could be. But they were absolutely marvelous children." She showed Linda a recent note from the oldest child, Bruce, who was seven. He'd done a primitive drawing of the Statue of Liberty, with a balloon of dialogue emerging from her mouth: "I love you, Val, I miss you."

Linda examined the note and laughed. "Isn't that cute, he's made the statue brown. But why does he call you Val, didn't you have them call you Nanny?"

Valerie shook her head. "I was their second nanny, and they thought of their first nanny as Nanny, so I was just Valerie, or Val."

"But weren't you jealous? Of the first nanny?"

What an odd question, Valerie thought. "Not in the least."

Linda appeared dubious. "Well," she said, "why did their first nanny leave?"

"She died. Actually, she was getting on a bit. She'd been their mother's nanny also."

Linda seemed entranced at this. She looked at Valerie's face as if watching the changing of the guard. Then her eyes flicked down to the resume, and when they fixed on Valerie's face again, her tone became accusatory. "You should be a model, you know, not a nanny."

Valerie was not unaware of her good looks, but considered them a nuisance, actually. To ward off the young men who wanted to wear her on their arms or show her off on their motorcycles, she dressed as plainly as she could, wore no makeup, and tied her dark brown hair back in a simple pony tail. When she looked in the mirror, she rather fancied her dark eyebrows, though: they were perfectly straight, and lent a bit of dash to her face that otherwise would have been altogether too sweet. Now she said, a little apologetically, "But wouldn't that be a vapid life? Modeling?"

"Oh, is that how you pronounce it? I've always wondered. And previously?" She swung her head toward the stairs, and shouted, "Thomas! Bring the dictionary!"

Almost scampering, but quietly, Thomas came halfway down the stairs. "All right," he said in a stage whisper, turned, and went upstairs again in the same muted scamper.

Valerie had to collect her thoughts before responding to Linda's expectant gaze. "I'm not sure, actually, about the pronunciation. Previously I worked in a bookstore. In London. I didn't put it on the resume because it was such a different line of work."

Linda said that if Valerie's references checked out, as she was sure they would, the Temples were prepared to offer fifty dollars a week more than her previous salary. And had they mentioned the private bathroom attached to the bedroom, which was really a very large room? Of course there would be full board. She paused, then added that Mr. Temple and she had already decided the rate of pay and saw no reason to alter it.

"That's very decent of you, I must say," Valerie said. She could certainly use the money. But this child was such a spoiled brat. No wonder this was the only opening in town. As Valerie thus wavered back and forth, Tom rejoined them—on the run, and with a big thick unabridged Webster's dic-

tionary under his arm like a football.

"She'll be out till five," he said with a smile as radiant as if he'd just won the sweepstakes. He handed the dictionary to his wife. "See," he told Valerie, "she stays up with us in the evening, till eleven, midnight, whatever, it's the only chance I get to see her during the week, so she sleeps all afternoon. So you would really have a lot of free time in the afternoon, and then, you'd be free most evenings—"

"We hardly ever go out," Linda interjected as she flipped the pages.

"And we wouldn't need you weekends," Tom continued. "Because we like to stay home with her. So you'd be free then."

And that's when Valerie decided the job had possibilities. Each time the man said the word free, her heart rose. Free time was exactly what she needed. She was going full steam on a paper analyzing American literature of the thirties.

"Vapid," Linda said. "It's either way, with a short *a* or a long one, vappid or vaypid." She sounded disappointed. "Here," she said, unceremoniously shoving the dictionary back at Tom and catching him off guard. "Don't drop it, it's bad for the spine."

Well, it was beginning to be clear where the child had learned her peremptory manner, Valerie thought. But if it didn't work out, she needn't stay. "Incidentally, if after checking my references, you should see your way clear to hiring me, what I like to do is have a gentlemen's agreement on a six-week probationary period, and then if either party is not entirely satisfied, we could give one another two weeks' notice."

"That's very generous," Tom said with great sincerity. "Because we're aware that Betsy is a little bit spoiled. An' it, an' it, it might take a while."

It was a swipe at the truth, anyway, Valerie thought, as she regarded his large, kind, baffled face. She said she imagined that she and Betsy would get on splendidly within a few days.

Valerie had suggested to the parents that they prepare Betsy for the separation. Perhaps they could explain that Mummy would go away every day, but she would come back every evening, the way Daddy did. "Perhaps you might even take her down to your office beforehand," she said to Linda, "so she can picture where you are, d'you know what I mean?"

The Temples agreed. But the evening Valerie moved in, it was apparent the child had been told nothing. Before Valerie left for class, she urged in a whisper that Betsy be told what to expect. Her advice went unheeded.

The next morning Valerie happened to be walking through the upstairs hall toward the stairs when Betsy came out of her room. Catching sight of her new nanny, Betsy shrieked, "What are you doing here?" Then she lowered her head and charged like a goat, knocking Valerie to the floor.

Before breakfast, the child hid in the dryer. When she was coaxed to the table by a promise that she could sit on Daddy's lap while she ate, she threw her food around. Tom had to change his suit, and Linda changed her dress twice. Valerie, feigning indifference, just popped up from the table each time she got splattered, politely saying "Excuse me" and returning with wet sections of her T-shirt and jeans. By the end of the meal, Tom could hardly keep his eyes off her.

Linda really showed her cowardice when the time for her departure drew near. Pale as a sheet, she slipped out the front door without a word while Tom distracted Betsy in the kitchen. Afterward, when the child dis-

covered her mother's absence, she naturally felt betrayed, and howled as if her heart would break.

Valerie's disgust at the parents fueled her compassion. "I know how you feel," she told Betsy in between the little girl's shuddering sobs, "but Mummy will come back later, and everything will be all right again, you'll see." After a while, Valerie persuaded Betsy to climb on her lap, and she sang her a song, and they went for a walk along the Promenade. This, Betsy announced, was her favorite place: the long strip of park at the top of the cliffs that overlooked Santa Monica Beach.

Valerie too had always liked a stroll on the Promenade. Besides the usual eucalyptus and live oaks and evergreens dotting the grass was a spectacular variety of palm trees: stubby ones that suggested pineapples; tall shaggy ones with braided trunks; soaring and stately ones, confining their greenery to an exuberant fountain of fronds at the top; and dozens of other kinds.

As soon as she and Betsy stepped off the sidewalk onto the grass, the little girl ran toward the narrow path winding along the edge of the cliffs. It was safe enough: a stout three-rail fence, about four feet from

the edge in most places, followed the undulations of the land. Nevertheless, Valerie hurried after the child and took her hand, and they walked along companionably. The nanny pointed out sailboats in the distance, and a slow-moving fishing boat followed by a slow-moving confetti of gulls, and Betsy said she didn't like fish. She didn't like the sea, and she didn't like the water.

"I can read," she announced, pausing in front of a sign lettered in red. "Danger," said Betsy. "Do not go beyond this fence."

"What a smart girl!" Valerie said, guessing that the child was merely remembering the message from having heard it read to her.

"I know."

After that, Betsy seemed bent on gaining a larger audience. She ran back from the path and startled an elderly gentleman dozing on a park bench to inform him that she could read. She accosted an ardent young couple with this information, tapping them on their shoulders until they looked at her blankly and sought each other's lips again. "You're not listening!" Betsy screamed repeatedly. When Valerie intervened, the child flailed at her nanny like a little windmill, shouting, "Go away!"

Valerie finally picked her up bodily and carried her back to the path.

That same command, at frequent intervals, became the sum of Betsy's conversation with her nanny for the remainder of the walk. She only dropped her hostility for about five minutes when she danced for a group of old ladies at several adjacent picnic tables, and gave a charming curtsy at their applause. But at home again, she ate a good lunch and slept like a rock all afternoon while Valerie studied. When the mother returned, Betsy ran to her and burst into tears.

"Did she miss me? Did she miss me?" Linda asked repeatedly, and appeared gratified to hear that this indeed had been the case.

Over the next few weeks, Betsy's venom continued unabated. One day Valerie, after watching Betsy play with her dolls, understood much better what was behind it.

One of the child's many dolls was a dark-haired beauty with a perfect four inch two inch four inch figure, wearing a blue satin evening gown and a tiara. Betsy was holding this doll, bouncing it slightly up and down on her knees as she spoke

in the high voice she used for her dolls' voices. "All right, Nanny," she said, "I'm going to make you disappear, just like magic." She paused, breathed in, and raised her right arm. Her right hand made a chubby claw. "Abra-ca-damn. Go invisible!"

Valerie, standing at the door to the child's room, said calmly, "How about going for a walk instead?"

Betsy shot her a look of sheer malice and turned back to the doll. "Oh, all right," she said petulantly, "come out of visible."

The small scenario was at once funny, hurtful, and en-lightening. If Betsy could make Valerie disappear, or if she could drive her away, her mother would have to stay home with her again. It was pathetic, really.

The billygoat charge at Valerie became a morning ritual. Betsy apparently thought a simple "Good morning, Nanny" was a rather drab greeting, Valerie told Gloria in the campus cafeteria. "Every morning, dressed to the nines, the kid shrieks at the sight of me as if she'd stumbled on a midnight burglar. But what courage, Gloria! She hurls herself at me like a cork from a champagne bottle."

"How do you stand it, Val? How can you take it?"

"Ah well, it's easy to sidestep her, since she's blind with rage." Valerie laughed. "I'm plotting how I can arrange matters so I'll be standing at the head of the stairs when Betsy spots me."

The two friends giggled. "Cool," Gloria said. "Do it."

Actually, however, Valerie redoubled her efforts to make friends with Betsy, and in fact made headway as long as they were alone.

One late afternoon they were playing with the dolls in Betsy's room. Betsy was holding the darkhaired beauty in the evening gown. "I'm a nanny," the child said in her doll voice. "I make money."

Valerie, holding a Raggedy Ann doll, also pitched her voice high. "I'm beginning to like you, Nanny," she said, moving Raggedy Ann's arms so that she hugged Betsy's doll.

Betsy smiled, making her doll's slender little hands clap.

Val continued in the same voice. "We can have some fun together, can't we?"

"Yes!" Betsy piped. In her own voice, she asked, "Can I sit on your lap, Nanny?"

"Of course."

And Betsy crept onto Valerie's lap, saying, "We can have some fun together."

"Yes, we can," Valerie said, hugging and kissing the child and rocking her, "because you're such a little honeykins."

Just then Linda appeared at the open door. "Hi, sweetie!"

Betsy threw her doll on the ground. "She's playing with my toys!" she shrieked, and ran to her mother and buried her head between her legs before crying and looking around balefully, shouting, "Meanie! Meanie!"

Linda stroked her head and laughed. "I think she thinks you're violating her space," she said.

After that, Betsy often called Valerie "Meanie" instead of "Nanny," with nary a reprimand from either parent. On the other hand, Linda once came home with a gorgeous sweater for Valerie, saying, "I couldn't resist, I knew it was perfect for you."

But by now, Valerie knew that her employer would grow cold again if either Tom or Betsy demonstrated even the slightest affection for the nanny.

One Friday evening, the three of them had been doing a puzzle while Linda read. Saturday morning, Valerie was already outside the house and on the front path when she heard Linda cheerfully call, "Bye-bye!" from the window. Valerie

turned and saw her, with Betsy next to her. The child was in her underpants, her tummy sticking out even more than usual because she had both hands on her hips. Betsy murmured something that Valerie didn't hear—until Linda relayed it. "She says you're mean!" she announced loudly, with glittering eyes and apparently in great good humor, and mother and child giggled.

Valerie was used to hearing Betsy call her mean but was a bit shocked at Linda's behavior. As she turned the corner, though, it suddenly hit her: when Linda was feeling cruel, she used the child as a pawn, a puppet mouthing her own hostility. And if Betsy's animosity lessened or grew muffled, Linda would broadcast it as she had done just now.

Val wished she had never mentioned a "probationary period." If she hadn't herself proposed that bloody stupid "gentlemen's agreement," she could give notice.

Not long after this, on a Friday, Valerie noticed that her only good pair of earrings—real jade, they'd been her mother's—had disappeared, and she found them on the ears of Betsy's favorite teddy bear. Naturally, she removed them, with her other hand fending off Betsy's little fists as the child

shrieked, "Mean! Mean! Mean Meanie! Teddy thinks so, too!" All that day, when Valerie would approach, Betsy would glare at her, clutching her violated teddy bear to her little chest and crooning to it not to worry, that she wouldn't let Meanie hurt it any more.

Valerie informed the parents of the earring incident and asked if a lock could be put on her door.

Linda laughed. "Well, at least you got them back. She took every necklace I owned last Christmas and hung them on the Christmas tree."

Tom looked glum. "Until she threw them in the fireplace."

"She's so quick," Linda agreed. "And of course we had a blazing fire going." Her expression became bright. "All gone!" she said, and shrugged. Then she explained kindly that a lock on Valerie's door would mar the woodwork. "I'm sorry," she added firmly.

Tom's eyes indicated that he also was sorry, but he said nothing.

That evening at class, Valerie was too upset to pay attention to the lecture on John Steinbeck, who was one of her favorites. What a household! The child ruled the roost, and next in the pecking order was Linda. Tom was at the bottom. Possibly miserable in this mar-

riage, but stuck because of his passion for his child. He was a real estate agent. The world's worst, Valerie expected. Especially since he liked to be home with his family on weekends, when most people wanted to look at houses! So how did the Temples afford their house, the gardener, her own salary? Ah, that must be why Linda had to go back to work, resenting every minute of it and taking it out on everyone else.

After class, Valerie tossed and turned in bed. And how could they be so oblivious to the child's own needs? It was actually unkind, she thought, recalling one horrible dinner-time—Valerie sometimes wondered how she could get these democratic employers to let her eat by herself in the kitchen.

Betsy had been picking at her food. Linda kept popping up from the table to fetch first the cookies the child demanded, then the grapes, then the ice cream with chocolate sauce. And when this last dish arrived, Betsy swept it onto the floor, burst into tears, clenched her fists, and turned on her mother.

"Leave me alone!" she wailed, alternately pounding the table and the air above her head. "Mommy, why can't you leave me alone!" In the shocked silence that followed, she put

both her elbows on the table and buried her head in her hands in odd, adult despair.

"Betsy, sweetie . . ." Linda faltered.

"Just leave me alone, I mean it!" And Betsy, howling all the way, had dashed to her room. White and stricken, without a glance at either Tom or Valerie, Linda followed. After that, the crying and shrieks of "Leave me alone!" issued from Betsy's room.

Finally Valerie had been unable to resist pointing out, "It's a terrible burden to run an entire household, when you're only three. The strain—" she'd shaken her head at Tom "—the strain must be terrible."

Valerie continued to fret, that sleepless Friday night, until long past midnight. At four A.M., she decided she would give notice. No, she'd quit without giving notice. To hell with the "gentleman's agreement." In fact, it would give her a malicious satisfaction to just leave them in the lurch.

There, she thought, now she could go to sleep. But she didn't. After a while, she crept downstairs to the kitchen to make some hot milk and cinnamon toast, which always calmed her. And there in the kitchen, right after the toast popped up and startled her,

Tom appeared, scaring her even more.

Humbly, he said he too had been unable to sleep, a cellar had really gotten him in trouble, and hey, hot milk, that looked like a good idea, and he poured some into a pan and stood at the stove while it warmed up, rambling on about points and interest and buyers and cellars, especially cellars.

"Are they damp?" Valerie asked in none too friendly a manner.

He blinked. "Sellers with an s."

"Oh, I thought you meant—"

"I know." He paused. "Matter of fact they're damp idiots half the time."

She'd really needed that laugh. Possibly he did, too. He turned from the stove to look at her with a sweet expression. "I know this job hasn't been easy for you, Val. I want you to know we really appreciate your hanging in there."

Valerie, sitting at the kitchen table, stirred her hot milk. "Well, I'm sorry to say that I have to tell you that Betsy is simply not my cup of tea." She shot him a fierce glance. "I mean, really, what do you feed it, this attack daughter of yours? I've heard of dogs, but an attack daughter? Is this the latest trend in the States?"

Tom was used to being nagged at. He gave a sheepish grin, and then, as he looked at her, the grin faded. "I know it's been rough," he said. "I really apologize. All I can say is, believe me, I never thought it would be like this."

"Nor did I."

"You know, you are such a beautiful person, and Betsy hasn't been herself, I realize that. But these things take time." As she raised her head and looked at him, she saw that his eyes were blazing, and she felt an unexpected attraction. He pleaded, "Could you give it just two more weeks?"

She sighed.

"Two more weeks? One more chance?"

Valerie sighed again and nodded.

Then he asked her about her schoolwork and seemed fascinated at her enthusiasm. He said hesitantly that he knew she had a lot of friends and couldn't understand why she didn't have a boyfriend.

She said she'd broken up last year with a chap she had almost married, but she had found his possessiveness worrisome.

"That was very wise of you," he murmured, his dark eyes searching her face.

Scarcely breathing, Valerie returned his gaze until the pull

between them was so strong she felt like rising from the table and stepping into his arms. Instead she bent her head over her cup of milk. Unlike some of her friends, she'd never been attracted to married men. Or never before. If she'd met a man at a party and discovered he was married, it was as if she had learned he was gay: any attraction clicked off like a switch. Until now. Another reason to leave, she thought.

Cue the wife, as she told Gloria later. Linda appeared at the door, making them both jump. Her eyes darted from one to the other as if she had caught them in a kiss. The milk Tom was heating boiled over, and she marched to the stove and turned off the gas. "You better clean that up, Thomas. Immediately!" Then she swept out of the room again, and during the painful silence afterward, Valerie drank half her milk and threw her cinnamon toast away and excused herself, and left Tom blushing, standing helplessly with a sponge in his hand. In bed again, Val knew without a doubt now that she would be leaving in two weeks.

As usual, she was off for the weekend, and barely saw any of the Temples. Thank God! In fact, now that she'd reached her decision, her misery eased. She loosened her dark hair from its

pony tail before she went to a rally Saturday morning protesting the Vietnam War, and even flirted with one of the other demonstrators whom she'd seen around campus but never talked to before. Saturday night she had a smashing time at a beach party; several people brought guitars; they sang long into the night. Sunday she met some friends for breakfast and went to the library to study the rest of the day and evening.

Monday morning, Linda, in a pale yellow suit the color of her hair, and Betsy, in a green flower-sprigged sundress down to her ankles, conducted their usual earsplitting separation scene, and an hour later Betsy and Valerie were headed for the Promenade. Valerie wore her jeans and carried her handbag in her backpack, along with a copy of *Cannery Row* in case she got a chance to read. Two more weeks, two more weeks, two more weeks, two more weeks—Valerie's right foot fell on the "two," and her left foot on the "weeks."

It was a clear day. The ocean below seemed serene, the water lazily rolling in, unfurling, and sliding out.

As one is apt to do after deciding to leave a place, she regarded her surroundings critically. The tall palms she'd

always admired looked different now, and it took her a moment to see why. She'd always before thought the outline of their trunks was straight. Actually, she saw now, the trunks swelled in and out, like horrid great vertical snakes that had swallowed small pigs or other prey and were digesting them.

Today she preferred the evergreens. Temperate-zone trees, she thought, the kind that grew at home. Today she even found the bougainvillea unattractive in its gaudiness. Perhaps she should even go back to England. Use her credit card or something. It would be lovely to see her family again. And she could use the sight of a few bluebells and cowslips, too, a few sights of subtle, gentle colors.

People were already starting to gather at some of the picnic tables, drinking coffee or tea or even beer despite the early hour. Eating, talking, laughing. Some of them were playing chess. A few couples were draped around each other. Children played. Normal children, whom Betsy regarded with a sort of detached, superior interest.

For a moment, glancing behind her, Valerie thought she saw Linda, as a figure of a woman stepped behind a palm tree. But then she realized

Linda was at work, in a pale yellow dress, and this blonde young woman was wearing a T-shirt and jeans.

Somewhere in front of her a musical group started playing, and a man's voice was heard on a loudspeaker, although she could not quite make out the words, but nearby someone said, "Bob Dylan!" and Val wondered if Dylan had appeared for some event, because people on the path hurried past her, and others left their tables to see what was happening up ahead.

All of a sudden she saw that Betsy had slipped through the railings of the fence and had started to dance on a small spur of ground, even though there were no old ladies to furnish an audience—or anyone else for that matter, Valerie realized as she glanced around. She stepped over the top rail and reached for the child, now poised at the edge of the cliff. Betsy laughed and slipped behind and Valerie felt a mighty push.

She half fell, half rolled about ten feet until she felt her arms almost yanked from their sockets. She had stopped moving. She was facing the cliff. Her feet were scrabbling below her, sending showers of pebbles bouncing below. She finally found a tenuous toehold in a

crevice. Not until then did she realize that her backpack had caught on a jagged rock. Its tip was still thrust between the strap of her pack and her left shoulder.

Illogically, instead of relief, she felt only terror. That push was too strong to have come from Betsy; who had attacked her? Where could she hide? The crevices on the cliff face were barely deep enough to hide an arm, much less a torso. She looked below her only once, in a dizzying glance that turned her legs to jelly. When she looked up, nobody was there, but she was as scared as if she'd seen her assailant. What she needed to do, Val felt, was to flatten herself against the cliff, to blend in. The rock that saved her wouldn't let her. Whimpering, she clung to it with both hands as she rotated her left shoulder, easing the backpack free.

Ah, now she could get closer to the cliff. She wrapped her arms around the rock and gratefully inhaled its dust. Close to her eyes, the cliff's dull color had reassembled into its brilliant and minute components: sparkling grains of black and white and gray and brown. She couldn't imagine what the big drops of red were. Oh, blood. It was rolling down from a gash on her forearm. It didn't hurt.

But her arms were beginning to ache. How long could she hold on?

Suddenly she knew it was Linda who had pushed her, who had stayed home from work and changed her clothes and followed her here and slipped behind a palm tree to wait for the right moment. Valerie felt another wave of fear sweep over her; she fought it down and forced herself to look up.

Again she saw nobody at the edge of the cliff. But could Linda be standing farther back, out of sight, ready to push her again, if Valerie made it to the top?

"Oh, don't be ridiculous," Val muttered. "You want to frighten yourself, do you?" Almost simultaneously, she noticed a slender tree about six feet to her left, growing from a shallow diagonal gully that slanted upward and disappeared as it rounded a bend. She stared at the tree; she visualized herself inching toward it. Ah, there was a toehold along the way, where golden meadowgrass tufted out of a narrow ledge. How deeply rooted were those dusty bushes above it? If she grasped them, would they give way?

Slowly, slowly, splayed against the rock face like a water bug, Valerie inched toward the tree. When she finally

reached it, she was shaking all over, and her spasms made its sparse branches and leaves jump and tremble also. She stayed with her arms wrapped around the tree until the shaking stopped.

Following the gully around the bend and up to the cliff's edge was far less dangerous, but her heart was hammering until she reached the top and, seeing no sign of danger, pulled herself over onto the grass. A moment later she was safe on the other side of the fence. Then she either passed out or slept awhile. When she woke up—or regained consciousness, she would never know which—the sun was still quite high. She walked unsteadily to a water fountain.

Her purse was still in her backpack, and the Steinbeck book. She took a handkerchief from the purse and washed her face and neck and arms—the cut was less serious than she'd thought—staring down an old woman who glanced at her critically.

She imagined herself explaining, "Someone just tried to murder me and I got all dirty," and she snorted in amusement. The old girl would think she was a drunk hippie. Valerie started giggling. She must be hysterical. She sat on the grass and threw back her head and

laughed. It felt wonderful. Then she got up and took the bus to the airport and used her credit card to book a passage on the next plane to London.

The snow had stopped. The girls would be home from school any minute. Valerie blew her nose and took some of the pillows from behind her and put them next to her and rested her head. Ironical that she had fallen in love with an American a few years later, she thought. But Jack and she hadn't come back to the States until ten years ago.

Jack knew about the incident in Santa Monica, but she had never told the children. The girls sat on the bed, listened with round eyes, and argued about whether their mum should try to find Betsy Temple or just forget the whole deal. "If that Betsy has a guilty conscience, she got what she deserved," said the younger one. "I wouldn't tell her if I were you."

"Hey, you were no prize when you were three, you know," said her older sister. "What was she like, Mum, on TV?"

"She was lovely."

"Maybe you were wrong about her, back then. If she turned out so well."

"Possibly," Valerie said. "I was such an expert about everything when I was twenty-three."

When Jack came home, he declined to give an opinion on the matter but held her close. "The answer will come to you, honey," he said. "Don't worry about it. Get well first."

The next day Valerie wrote to Betsy, care of the Oprah Winfrey show. And a few weeks later, Betsy rang her up. "It's really nice of you to want to get me off the hook," she said in her gentle voice, "but the fact is, you must be mistaken, maybe you were a nanny for some other Santa Monica family."

Valerie paused. "I can't—I think that would be too much of a coincidence, don't you think?" Her caller was silent. "Betsy, you don't remember me at all? A nanny called Valerie McKee?"

"No. All I know is, I seem to recall I was a horrible brat at that age."

Valerie didn't know what to say. "How are your parents, Betsy? Where are they now? How's your mother?"

"Oh, Mom disappeared, right about the same time. I think she just left us. Dad's in Florida. He's still in real estate. Look, I wish, I want to believe you, but the thing is, believe

me, I saw my nanny fall, all the way to the bottom."

Valerie was baffled. That adoring mother left the family? Betsy saw her nanny fall to the bottom? "But what was your nanny's name, then? Do you remember?"

"I don't remember. I guess I just called her Nanny. But I remember charging at her with my head down, and I saw her fall, I saw her blonde hair shining in the sun as she went down, it was crazy, it was . . . it

was crazy, believe me. She had this like short straight blonde hair."

Valerie's hand flew to her mouth as she clasped the phone against her chest for a moment, remembering Linda's hair. Then she collected herself. "I see," she said. "Well," she said.

They agreed to meet in a few weeks, but Betsy wrote a note with no return address, canceling their lunch date. And Valerie was as relieved as she had ever been in her life.

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UNSOLVED

by

Robert Kesling

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the September issue.

It was a quiet Saturday morning at police headquarters until the man came bursting through the door. His face was livid. "You've gotta stop them!" he ranted. "If you don't, I'm not responsible for what happens later!"

Homicide Detective Ryan quickly sized up his unexpected visitor, a man running to late middle-aged corpulence, whitehaired, expensively dressed, and obviously out of control.

"Stop right there, mister!" he ordered. "Tell me who you are and what's bothering you. Start at the beginning."

The man's face still twitched, but he calmed enough to say, "I'm Erik Forest, president of Forest Industries. It's those retirees out at Shady Glen Retirement Home. They keep walking past my home, a different couple—man and wife—every day. They make threatening gestures at me. Like drawing their fingers across their throats."

"Why would they do a thing like that, Mr. Forest?"

"They all detest me because I got the better of them in business deals. All six couples are out to get me. You gotta protect me. That's your job."

"I'm afraid, sir," said Ryan evenly, "they haven't broken any law as of now. Right of free expression, you know. But I promise to look into your complaint. Meanwhile, I'd advise you to keep your temper in check."

The following day, a gloomy overcast Sunday, the homicide detective called at Shady Glen Retirement Home. It was far from elegant. An elderly man answered the doorbell, leaning on his cane.

Ryan introduced himself, then declared, "We have received a complaint from a Mr. Erik Forest that you people living here have been harassing him. I'd like to straighten this out before the situation gets violent."

"Come right in, sir. Have a chair," said the old gentleman. "So we've got old Forest worried, eh? We hoped he'd go to the police and ask for protection. It gives us an opportunity to present certain facts without that old devil's finding an excuse to sue us again. Or worse."

"What facts?"

"Ah, that *is* a problem. You must understand that Forest is Satan himself. He has acquired his fortune by bullying, threats, assaults, legal loopholes, and any other means to get what he wants—domination and money. There are six couples of us here; we men were formerly an agent, banker, clerk, doctor, engineer, and farmer. He ruined us all, one way or another."

"Could you be more specific?"

"Well, not directly, sir. If Forest found out, he would stop at nothing. But I can tell you this much: my wife has been married three times. Her first husband died, leaving her a widow with one son. Forest held the mortgage on her home and sweettalked her into marriage. Then he made her life a living hell. She left him and married me. He hates her for it."

"I still don't see what I can do if you won't give me some hard facts."

"Well, we've talked it over—the other five couples, my wife, and myself. We husbands are Arthur, Charles, Ernest, Frank, Henry, and Karl, and our wives are Alice, Celia, Elsie, Flora, Helga, and Kitty. Let's just say that our last names are Illed, Liasson, Oresth, Orrible, Rimeo, and Tebyeri." He slowly and deliberately spelled out each name as the detective took notes.

"If you'll pardon my saying so," said Ryan, "those names sound phony."

The old man's eyes glistened. "Oh, they are!" he agreed. "That's part of our plan. At the end of the week, I'll tell you our *real* names—if you still want to know. Meanwhile you can visit us here as much as you like, get better acquainted, but *don't* ask us what we have against that old devil Forest. Each day one couple will go out, starting tomorrow, Monday. Keep a careful record of the sequence. It will be revealing."

He could be dealing with a bunch of senile kooks, reflected Ryan. On the other hand, the old man seemed awfully sincere. Perhaps something sinister lurked under the surface.

"Okay," he consented. "One week. Then, if I haven't learned more, I'll demand to know your real names and possibly charge you all with malicious mischief in aggravating Mr. Forest."

"Fair enough!" declared the oldster. "Remember, keep a list of the sequence in which we go out. A different couple will stroll past Forest's mansion each day. No theatrics this time, I promise."

- (1) Ryan soon learned that no husband and wife had the same first initial; hence, Arthur was not married to Alice, Charles was not married to Celia, and so on.
- (2) Flora and her husband left the home the day after Henry and his wife and the day before Mr. and Mrs. Illed. Mrs. Illed is not Helga.
- (3) Mrs. Oresth went out at least two days after Celia and at least two days before the retired engineer's wife.
- (4) Mrs. Orrible (who is not Celia) went out later in the week than the doctor but before the farmer.
- (5) Flora stayed in the retirement home all day Friday.
- (6) Karl paraded in front of Mr. Forest's home at least two days after Arthur did and at least two days before Charles did. They included Elsie's husband, Mr. Rimeo, and the retired banker.
- (7) Alice went out the day after Frank. Two days later the retired clerk and his wife left the retirement home. Their last names were Orrible, Illed, and Tebyeri.

On Saturday night Detective Ryan returned to Shady Glen Retirement Home. All the residents had assembled in the small living room and were eagerly awaiting him.

"Well," declared Ryan, "I have the order in which you couples went out during the week. So what's the mystery you are afraid to tell me straightforwardly?"

"Now," replied one of the ladies, "if you will write down the initials of man and wife before their last name, then list them in sequence, I think our message will be obvious. And you will understand our fear of telling you directly."

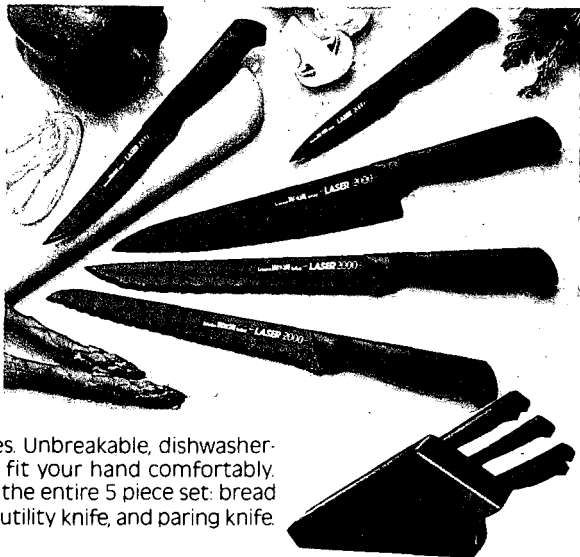
Detective Ryan puzzled over his list for several minutes. Then, "Aha!" he exclaimed. "I will surely investigate the matter. And I can honestly testify in court, if need be, that no *one* of you gave me the lead."

What did the homicide detective discover?

MAIL ★ ORDER ★ MALL

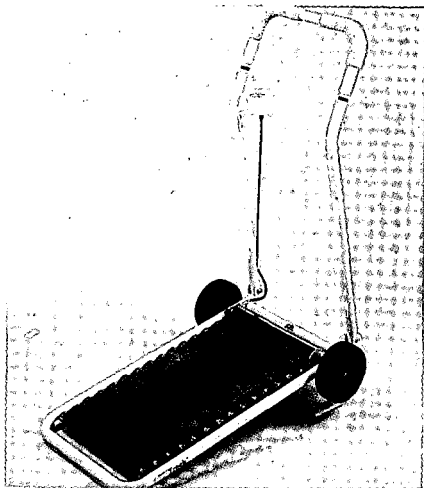
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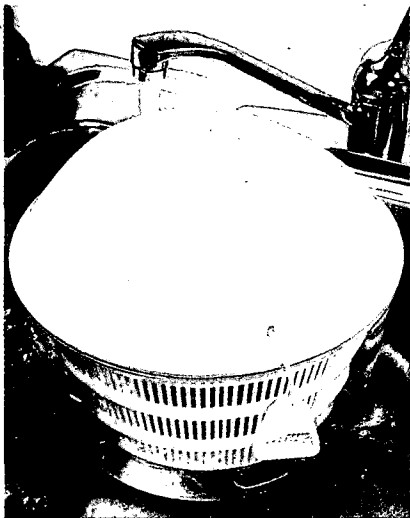


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The Witch and the Curse on Black Dan Harrington

by Angela Zeman



The witch of Wyndham-by-the-Sea took an appreciative sip of the Oregon pinot noir that Black Dan Harrington had opened just for her and, after complimenting him on his selection, mentioned that she never saw his wife, did she not like coming to his restaurant?

He poured a small sample of the wine for himself, then answered, "Oh, and that's an old custom, handed down from my da, and to

him from his da, keeping the wife apart from the way we make a living. It prevents the curse, you see."

Black Dan nestled more comfortably into the white plastic chair, which was structured for lesser frames than his, sipped his pinot, and surveyed, with the expression of a cat full of cream, his restaurant's tables. Each one, whether indoors or out here by the dock, had been filled with patrons since lunchtime. He'd hustled Chris Greco to work at the piano on the balcony at three this afternoon. Pete and Frank, who played saxophone and bass fiddle, respectively, had been called and were to join him as soon as they could arrive, instead of waiting for the customary seven o'clock set. Black Dan worked determinedly to see that Harrington's Restaurant meant good food, good drink, and good jazz to its patrons.

The witch smiled down at her cat Jezebel, who had just meowed and curled her tail around Black Dan's ankle. Jezebel never lost an opportunity to seduce someone who had access to fresh fish.

The witch said, "You don't mean to tell me that you keep your wife away from here because of some curse an ancestor of yours dreamed up to keep a nagging wife away during the day?"

Black Dan looked anxious. "Oh, I know it sounds ridiculous, but the curse says that to allow your wife a bit of your business 'will drive the food and drink from hungry mouths.'" He smiled back at her then. "My family has always been in the saloon and restaurant business. We have a vested interest in keeping mouths from going hungry or thirsty, you see." As if to prove his point he poured a little more wine into the witch's glass.

He glanced at the boats bobbing like happy corks at their moorings in the Technicolor sunset and added, after a sigh, "But you know, I should invite her to come. On a day like this, I have to believe that any curse would be helpless."

A miraculous combination of benign sun, lazily lapping water, and fragrant breezes off the sound this Tuesday had pried residents and shopkeepers of Wyndham-by-the-Sea from their air-conditioned cubicles, enticing them to breathe deeply and make work merely a word in the dictionary.

The witch surveyed the crowd shrewdly. "I see you've added the entire village board of trustees to your list of devotees."

Today being the second Tuesday of the month, the board meeting was slated to begin at eight at the town hall, but they'd gathered beforehand at Harrington's, taking the two next-best tables. (The witch had the best one, as always.) They could be heard wrangling

testily over rules of cabana rights at the beach.

"And visiting constabulary as well?" she added with elevated eyebrows, nodding towards a corner table.

Black Dan spared only a glance at the gentleman in question. "We had a bit of excitement here this morning. The leader of a gang of thieves was apprehended somewhere, still smoking from the heat of the latest in a series of jewel snatches, I gather—"

"You couldn't possibly mean Georgie Fontana has been up to his old tricks again, could you?"

Black Dan's blue eyes widened. "Indeed I do. How—"

"That police detective eating your crabcakes is from the same village as the one called home by Georgie Fontana—one of New York's more accomplished gem thieves. He usually collects a gang around himself. It was too perfect a match to overlook." The corners of her mouth curled faintly upwards.

"A clairvoyant match, my dear. Some sort of written evidence pointed to Harrington's as involved somehow, as a meeting place or something." He shrugged. "The boy is supposed to be undercover, on the lookout for the rest of the desperadoes, but of course I'm not surprised *you* would spot him." He grinned at her.

Just then a girl with a dark curly mop of hair and an intent look on her small face came up to Black Dan with papers needing his signature. He signed with a flourish, then introduced her to the witch.

"Mrs. Risk," he said to the witch, "I'd like you to meet the newest member of our staff and one who shows great promise—at least, we've benefited greatly from her presence so far!—Miss Lizette Smith, the genius of reducing kitchen chaos into blessed order. Lizette, Mrs. Risk, one of Wyndham's most handsome," and here he wagged his devilishly curled, rust-tinted eyebrows at the witch, "and most intriguing residents."

Lizette considered her with some curiosity, then smiled and said, "Nice to meet you."

The witch considered her thoughtfully in return and nodded. "Lovely," was all she said.

"She was thrust upon us by Chef Vinnie's wife Tina. A cousin of some sort, aren't you?" he said vaguely.

Lizette nodded. "I put the checks for you to sign on your desk, under the brandy bottle, is that okay?"

"Perfect," said Black Dan. He gazed over Lizette's head at the bustling outdoor bar behind her, and again a smile curled, catlike,

on his handsome face. "Absolutely perfect. Thank you, darlin'. Take a few minutes to enjoy the breeze," he added.

Lizette grinned and dashed away.

"Hardworking girl?" murmured the witch as she watched Lizette race to the kitchen door clutching her signed papers.

"The best. Well, since we seem to be overflowing with blessings, it's back to work for this old son." He stood up and replaced his chair beneath her table. "Even though we look as if we're prospering like Midas's daughter, I don't mind admitting to you that Harrington's can ill afford to offend even the least of these patrons. This is our third season." He sighed. "If we don't record some solid profits in the old ledger this summer, we'll be finding a new, less grand home come September."

He stood motionless for a moment, staring sadly at his feet as if envisioning imminent departure, but then he looked up, energetic and merry again. "But don't our prospects look grand now? If you have any musical requests, just ferry them by waiter upstairs to Chris. He said, by the way, to tell you hello. Hello." He turned to salute the piano player on the balcony with a wide grin and nod. Chris did an acknowledging riff on the keyboard and swung into a lively Thelonious Monk tune.

Black Dan waved away the witch's thanks for the wine and hurried to the indoor section of the restaurant.

A moment later, the witch spotted the girl, Lizette, coming outside through the same door by which her boss had left, where she paused. The witch noticed that, in contrast to her earlier shine of confidence, she looked harried and possibly even frightened. Rick the bartender, a tall blond young man with a teasing grin, reached over the bottles and gave one of Lizette's dangling curls a tweak as if he were a small boy in school.

Lizette started, then after flashing him a distracted smile immediately turned her back on him. His grin deflated at once. With a disappointed look on his face, he turned to wait on customers at the other end of the bar. As soon as he moved on, Lizette's expression of fear returned. She appeared to the witch to be casting side glances at the undercover policeman.

To the witch's great interest, the girl ultimately fastened her gaze on one of the patrons of the bar, a short man in a suit that looked several sizes too small for his rotund shape. After their eyes locked for a brief moment, the two of them walked towards the

west parking lot, one behind the other, and vanished out of the witch's sight.

The witch mused on Lizette's apparent odd taste in male friends, but as no more events occurred in which either the patron or the girl figured, she ordered Chef Vinnie's famous warm duck salad for a light dinner to go with her wine; she and Jezebel enjoyed it greatly. After easing Jezebel comfortably into her carrying basket, she strolled slowly down the narrow strip of beach for the two mile walk to their house.

The warmth of the next late afternoon developed much as the one before and once again enticed the witch and her cat to pass some time at Harrington's waterfront tables. Upon arrival, Jezebel hopped out of her basket and began sniffing the breeze.

The witch again settled contentedly in her chair, and indulged herself not only in Wyndham's wealth of weather, scenery, music, food, and drink, but also in fascinated observance of her fellow man. That the policeman from the neighboring village was seated again at his table was one of the interesting items she noted.

She'd just finished her wine—a rich zinfandel this time—and had shared some mussels in a savory broth with Jezebel when rumbles coming from the direction of the kitchen disturbed the benevolent fabric of the evening.

The witch watched with interest as Black Dan conferred with his partner, Barton Peacock, in hushed rapid tones. Peacock owned and managed the hotel to which Harrington's restaurant was attached. Chef Vinnie stormed out and joined them. Vinnie muttered some statements punctuated with curses and charged back to his inner kingdom, leaving behind dismayed expressions on Peacock's and Dan's faces. Black Dan raised his palms to the skies, let them fall to slap his thighs; then he strode inside to join his chef.

Barton Peacock sighed and returned to his post in the hotel at the front of the building. Chris, Pete, and Frank picked up their faltered beat, and the mellow jazz worked its magic on the few alarmed or curious souls.

A few moments later out bustled Lisa, Harrington's hostess, with a blackboard proclaiming "Duck Festival" and listing a vast selection of items featuring, in addition to Chef Vinnie's trademark warm duck salad, duck ravioli, duck tacos, duck tidbits with hot sauce, duck soup, duck medallions, and on and on, plus free duck paté with every dinner order.

Black Dan strolled disconsolately from the kitchen just as the witch finished perusing the blackboard. On spotting the witch, he walked over and sat down at her table. Jezebel leaped lightly into his lap.

"Everything satisfactory for you two tonight?" he asked, absently stroking Jezebel's glossy black fur.

"Delicious as always. I regret I had mussels tonight. If I'd known, I would've ordered duck."

Black Dan's hands made a massive fist as he clasped them before him on the table. He shook his head. "I dared to ignore the curse, and look at the results," he said mournfully.

"I beg your pardon?"

"After we spoke yesterday, I brought my dear wife to Harrington's—her first visit. Such a beautiful evening it was."

He took in a great gulp of extra air and let it out in a long sigh. "Well, it's not a total loss, so I suppose it was a mere warning. But I'll not make that mistake again."

"What exactly are you referring to, a 'mere warning'?"

"The wires in the main deep freeze—they must've been chewed in the night by some arctic rodent or other, for they parted company with the motor. In this heat, the defrosting took no time at all. We discovered the problem right on the brink of spoilage. Fortunately I have a second, smaller freezer, but some foods you can't refreeze. It has too devastating an effect on the taste of the product."

"Like duck?"

His big head wagged up and down. "Like duck. We'd just received an enormous order yesterday. Well, you know Chef Vinnie has a remarkable hand with duck."

"Yes, indeed." She patted his clasped hands. "Don't worry. I'm positive your rebellious desire for your wife's company brought you only credit, not evil, Dan."

He shook his head. "I don't know. I told you how we're right on a financial knife edge. One nudge either way . . ."

"Have some of this remarkable zinfandel. Tomorrow will bring new crowds, new profits."

Curiosity—a character trait overly maligned in proverbs, in the witch's opinion, for she set much store by it—impelled her to coax Jezebel into her basket once again to visit Harrington's for lunch. Extra high temperatures drove them inside today. During the next twenty minutes, she

witnessed the heat slowly overwhelming and then driving away the bustling lunchtime crowd that had gathered. The air conditioner had somehow malfunctioned.

Soon a small man carrying a toolbox was hustled in through the back door and escorted between Black Dan's brawny shoulders and the thinner, more wiry ones of Barton Peacock into the nether regions of the building.

Black Dan reappeared alone, mopping his fair brow with a dinner napkin. He gave the clumps of idle, murmuring waiters and waitresses permission to leave the premises until four o'clock. Then, spotting the witch, he sauntered exhaustedly over to her. She could see he hadn't shaved yet today.

"They pulled you from your bed, my poor man?"

He shrugged away the importance of his bed, dropped into a chair next to her, and signaled the bartender for service, ordering icy champagne for her, a dish of melting ice cream for Jezebel, and a frosty beer for himself. "Only thing to drink when the mercury passes ninety-nine, don't you agree, my dear?" he said with a crooked grin. "Especially when it's indoors."

"What now, Dan?"

"Rodents? Leprechauns? Faeries I've somehow offended? There will go the remaining defrosted duck meat from yesterday. That'll spoil soon, with such heat in the kitchen. It's not just the air conditioner, it's the electricity, which refrigerators require for some perverse reason," he said with morose humor. "Oh." He turned to Lisa the hostess. "Send a jug of ice water down to the electrician, would you, my dear? And keep him well supplied." Lisa nodded and got busy.

"Hot as a lava tube down there," he said.

"You're a good, thoughtful man, Dan Harrington. More disconnected wires?"

"Smashed, more like. They must be replaced, says the electricity guru. A two hour job, at minimum, even with his helper arriving soon. We've lost all our lunch business. God only knows how the dinner crowd will react. Will they hear the news and stay away? Will they hear about the curse on me and stay away because of *that*?"

"Oh, surely not."

"You're so comforting, my lovely, but can you really say that with any confidence? No. I am well and truly cursed."

The witch could only reach over and squeeze her friend's hand. She stayed to lend moral support because there was not much else anyone could do and Black Dan's morale was in severe need of support. His normally beaming face seemed shrunken with worry. Occasionally she saw Lizette flitting about the premises with a face fully as haunted as Dan's.

By three o'clock, the few remaining in the restaurant had subsided into solitary islands of misery. The witch had taken to munching crackers to keep from succumbing to the soporific effects of heat combined with champagne. Jezebel dozed sprawled on her back next to a lifeless air-conditioning duct. An occasional afternoon drinker braved the heat and requested one of the liquids being kept on ice at the outside bar, but not often enough to revive Black Dan's depleted profits.

Finally the air conditioner began sputtering into occasional life. The repairman had just popped out of his dungeon to promise that rejuvenation was mere minutes away when suddenly from the outdoor bar came shouts of "Poison! I've been poisoned! What kind of place is this, a funeral parlor, and you supply your own bodies? Where's a doctor? I've been poisoned, don't just stand there, get your manager!"

Jezebel stalked outside on the heels of Black Dan. Barton Peacock came running up just behind, a little smudged from his basement inquiries. At the moment the witch passed through the door after Peacock, she heard the blessed sounds of mechanical humming.

"The air conditioner's running again, Dan," she exclaimed. But Black Dan didn't hear. He'd enfolded a small fat man who was sputtering in Dan's massive embrace. Dan was expertly executing the Heimlich maneuver.

"Wha—let go of me, you big ape! I said I was poisoned, not choking!" He jerked himself free, and Black Dan retreated a step, a dazed expression on his face.

"I'm sorry. I'm not myself just now—I mean, how have you been poisoned? Can you vomit anything up?"

"Don't be gross. Wait'll I call my lawyer. You'll see who's choking. You the owner?" The witch was highly intrigued to identify the man as the one Lizette had walked out with two days ago.

"Yes—" began Black Dan.

"We're partners. He runs the restaurant, I run the hotel." Barton Peacock elbowed himself forward. He straightened his jacket as if about to face a firing squad.

"Well." The man straightened his over-snug suit jacket also and eyed Barton Peacock up and down. "You have any idea of the slop this fella tried to get me to eat?" He jabbed a thumb in the direction of Rick, the bartender.

Rick, behind the man's back, pointed to a wilted duck salad resting on the bar beside a sweating glass of beer. Black Dan tilted his head and said, "I regret if our salads are not up to our usual standards, we've been dealing with difficulties lately. Perhaps we can fix you something—"

"Not good enough!"

"A gift certificate for a free dinner for you and a comp—"

"Are you kidding? This's gonna cost you!"

Barton Peacock spread his hands wide. "What, then? We'd like to make you satisfied."

Black Dan, standing next to his partner, jammed his clasped hands beneath his generous chin as if he were praying. "The curse," he could be heard muttering under his breath. "I'm cursed."

The man scratched at a tooth with a fingernail, a speculative gleam in his eye. "I feel sick," he said, not looking it. "You don't know duck from dead cat. Your meat's tainted."

"It's good duck," protested Rick.

"On a hot day like today," murmured the witch suggestively, "perhaps a warm salad doesn't *taste* as appealing as something cold."

"Yeah," the man agreed, nodding, when he heard her. "You should've served something else."

"A fine suggestion. Remember that, boy," said Black Dan to Rick, who looked confused.

"Tell you what, while I'm deciding on just how big a bundle it'll take to make me drop my lawsuit, I'd like to give a little party. Can you accommodate me and about fifty of my pals?"

"Definitely," said Black Dan, dropping his fists away from his chin. "We'd be delighted. When?"

"Oh, how about tomorrow, two thirty. Lobster would be good, and your best booze, and lots of desserts. And get me a piano player."

"No problem. How about our upstairs room? It's right next to the bandstand, with a great view of the water. That's where we have dancing, so there's lots of space. A bar's already set up. We could arrange the tables and chairs upstairs any way you'd like—"

"Okay, okay. But no charge, right?"

"Uh, well, no. We'd be pleased to offer you a special price," began Black Dan.

Barton Peacock interrupted. "I'll leave you in Dan's capable hands. You can tell him what you want. You'll be happy you came, Mr. ah—"

"Tully. Leon Tully. I'm staying in your hotel, upstairs here."

"Wonderful. Hope you enjoy your stay as our guest. Let the front desk know if you require anything, you'll find our staff most helpful. Bye, Dan."

And with this, Barton Peacock walked away, going suddenly limp-shouldered as he stepped indoors.

He poked his head back out. "It's cool again in here, Dan." Then he disappeared from sight.

The witch wandered off, first checking out the west parking lot, which was nearly empty, then strolling back into the rapidly cooling interior of the restaurant. The hotel registration desk and lobby could be reached through a wide doorway on the far side of the restaurant. The witch stepped into the lobby, pausing to appreciate the rustic seafarers' appearance of its decor and the polished oak stairs that led to the upstairs rooms.

She stood at the bottom of the stairs and peered at the few rooms she could see on the upper floor. She turned then and strode away, her footsteps loud on the plank floor. Turning again, she tiptoed back to stand just out of sight of the final curve of the stairs. Moments later, she snaked out a hand and grabbed a handful of dark curly hair as Lizette darted down the last few steps of the staircase.

"Oh!" Lizette squealed with pain and dropped an empty cardboard box she was carrying.

"I feel the need for a nice long conversation, Lizette. And I would like you to join me. Do you know of a private place where we can talk?"

In spite of the strain of her head's being wrenched backwards, Lizette nodded, eyes huge with fright. Only then did the witch release her hair.

Lizette rubbed her skull and proceeded quietly down a side passage, with the witch following.

When they had gotten settled in a closet-sized nook next to the pantry, with the witch sitting on an upturned lettuce crate in front of Lizette's tiny bench-desk, the witch began. "First tell me, you're a friend of Georgie's, aren't you?"

"Yes. No."

The witch nodded. "I see. You know him, but he's no friend."

Lizette's eyes widened, then tears welled.

"You might as well unburden yourself, dear. I have a feeling you are much more than just an accomplice, am I right? Breathe deeply, that's it. Take your time. But not too much time. We have to keep Dan from losing everything he owns to that odious little wretch outside."

Lizette took a shuddering deep breath and nodded. "Yes." After a pause, she blurted, "This is the first real home I've ever had," and she burst into tears. Then, abruptly, she hiccuped to a stop, wiped at her eyes, and continued. "My grandma is also Chef Vinnie's wife's, Tina's, grandma. You know. Big family, everybody lookin' out for each other. Well, my mom's got her hands full raisin' too many kids, and my dad—uh, he's not around at all, unless you count visitin' days at the jail."

"And your good grandmother wrenched you out of the trouble for which you were heading and convinced your cousin Tina to wangle you a job here, away from your home village, where people knew you far too well. What were your particular vices, dear?"

"A little hoisting and hooking."

"Petty theft and prostitution?"

Lizette reddened and nodded.

"Drugs?"

"No, never drugs."

"Thank heaven for that, anyway. Proceed."

"Well, at first I didn't like bein' no charity case, you know? And they worked me like a slave! For slave wages, too. But then I saw that everybody around here works like that, Vinnie and Mr. Harrington and everybody. I can't afford a car, so Mr. Peacock rented me the cutest little bed-sit right here in the hotel, for peanuts! At first, I thought it was just so's I'd be handy so I could work for free on my off hours, but honest, it wasn't."

"And my cousin, Tina, who I don't even hardly know, for cryin' out loud, gave me the prettiest skirt to wear on dates. And Ricky the bartender, he's really nice. He and some others here, they took me to a rock concert out at Westbury with them. And Chris Greco, the piano player . . ." Tears began to well in her eyes again. "He's always giving me advice and stuff. He says I remind him of his daughter. He's the nicest—my dad never—"

"I see that you've astonished yourself by liking it here."

"And I'm *good* at my job. When I started, Vinnie said I should just be a gofer for awhile, to see what I'm good at. Turns out I'm good at organizing things and at taking care of detail stuff, and there's a lot of details in this business," she finished proudly.

The witch studied her little criminal. "So you've found yourself, have you? Someday, if you learn more about mankind, you'll appreciate how rare and wonderful that is. Many never attain the heights you've reached."

"Heights? I make peanuts!"

The witch smiled. "Never mind. How did Georgie arrive in all this?"

"He said a buddy of his spotted me, tipped him off where I was. First he said he was glad to see me. Then he said he had a deal for me, to make some big money fast. I was to get a package from him—and he promised it wasn't dope—and then the next day pass it on to a guy who'd give a password. Simple as that."

"And you agreed?"

"No way. I said blow, no deal. Then he said if I didn't all he had to do was compliment Mr. Peacock on the class of his hookers, and I'd be thrown out of here . . ." she gave a small sob, then continued bitterly. "I saw then that he wasn't no friend of mine, never had been. He just used me. He didn't care if I was happy here, just how convenient I'd be to his operation."

"So you agreed."

"I had to. He told me three times would do it, by that time he'd find a new goat to pass things for him. So I passed the stuff two times. I can't tell you how horrible scary it was. But I did it. And all I could think of was, it was nearly over. I never took a dime for it, either. I just wanted to be rid of Georgie."

She paused, took a deep breath. "Third time, well, Mr. Harrington called a surprise all-staff meeting when I was still holding the bag on the third pass. Ricky told me it was the cops, wanting to question the staff about somebody named Georgie Fontana. So I took a little detour, talked the hotel desk clerk into letting me lock up the package in one of those guest security lock boxes, the kind where the desk manager keeps a key, and you've got a key, and it takes two keys to open it."

"I begin to see." The witch closed her eyes for a second. "You lost your key."

"A shipment of fresh duck meat from the farm had just come in," said Lizette with a tremor. "It was still stacked on the ramp by the

back door. I slipped the key right into one of those little packages, sort of shoved it into the meatiest part. It's my job to check all incoming orders against invoices and for quality, so nobody would think anything of my fooling with the packages, you know?"

The witch nodded. "Then you joined the meeting with the police detective, secure in the knowledge that he could search anywhere but would probably never think of the guest security boxes in the hotel."

"Yeah, and he wouldn't find any key on me, either, to tip him off. And then, to make things worse, the cop was from my and Georgie's village. He *remembered* me. He said something about it, and . . . and Vinnie and Mr. Harrington, they practically had a fit, like they'd tear him apart if he dared think I could do anything wrong. I was so stunned, and then . . . and then the cop was nice to me, you know? I guess he figured if these people all liked me, I musta changed, and he smiled and wished me luck, even. I got kind of misty about it, and happy, and . . . and I forgot the stupid ducks. Next time I remembered them, somebody'd stuck 'em into the deep freeze already, and there they were—a zillion packages of duck meat, frozen like bricks."

"So all these disasters have been engineered by you, so you could defrost the ducks and find the key. I take it you haven't found it yet."

"No. I searched and searched. I think I drove the kitchen staff nuts; all the crazy ways I was constantly poking at the duck meat before it got cooked. I even smuggled some into the ladies' room, but there were so many ducks!

"Anyway, Mr. Tully, he was the next receiver. He showed up on schedule and gave the password. I told him if he'd just cool it for a few days, the cops would lose interest and leave, but he said no way. No cops from my village would know him, 'cause he wasn't from around there, he said. He wanted the package right then." She took another deep breath as if the telling was wearing her out. "When I explained to him that it'd take awhile to hand over the package anyway, because I'd lost the key, he, well, he . . ."

"He said produce the key in short time or he'd blow off your kneecaps or some such physical threat."

"He carries a switchblade strapped to his ankle." Her shoulders lifted to her ears as if the memory caused her to cringe.

"And so this ruckus he's causing is only a distraction, to give you a chance to sneak the remaining duck carcasses to his room.

After the packages thaw, you both can probe for the key in relative safety."

"Uh-huh."

"My stars. Couldn't you have gotten the hotel manager to open the box for you?"

Lizette shook her head mournfully. "I tried that first thing. The clerk who let me borrow the box, he said they'd have to break the lock. The hotel doesn't keep duplicate keys so guests can't accuse them of getting into their valuables. He said they'd break it for me if I'd pay for it, but who has the money on the little salary I make?"

"Well, let's not sit here any longer, let's take care of Mr. Tully. You realize that Harrington's Restaurant is on the verge of financial ruin. If they don't stop losing money, they could close by September. They were counting on this season's profits to save them. And until you came along, it looked like they were going to do extremely well."

Lizette blinked at her in stricken astonishment.

The witch paused to explain patiently, "Darling, the restaurant business is one of the most difficult enterprises in which to succeed. Since you seem to like it, maybe you'll be lucky enough to experience that difficulty firsthand—someday. Come."

"What are you going to do? What's going to happen to me? What's going to happen to Harrington's, and all my friends?"

The witch gazed at her gravely. "You must leave events in my hands, dear."

Lizette stared teary-eyed at the witch. "I've heard about you, you know. How you're a witch an' all. Guess if anybody can fix this mess, you can." A second later, she took a calming deep breath. "Okay," she said grimly. "If I have to go to jail, I'll go. I guess I deserve it, all right. Just tell me what to do. We have to keep Harrington's from suffering from my dumbness."

They returned outside, which now was showing signs of activity. The waiters had returned, and the tables were filling with happy patrons again. But Rick's fair, amiable face was dark with anger as he stood wiping glasses behind the bar, listening to Tully and Black Dan's conversation.

Tully was seated at the bar, a generous drink in his hand, still negotiating with a heavily perspiring Black Dan about what he should get in return for his poisoning. The salad that had "poisoned" him had been pushed aside and sat forgotten by his elbow

on the bar surface. Jezebel crouched next to the plate as if standing guard.

The witch walked up to the salad and peered closely at the wilted lettuce. The duck meat appeared uneaten but did look mutilated, with numerous punctures dotting it, apparently having been vigorously forked in the search for that elusive key.

Black Dan was making a final exhausted stand. To the witch it was apparent that he wouldn't be able to withstand Tully's demands much longer.

When Tully spotted Lizette behind the witch, he seemed to take her presence as some kind of signal. He slid off his seat and pushed his drink away. His rubbery lips pulled back in a feral grin. "Fine. If you won't deal, I'm calling my lawyer. I'll close this joint."

Rick flung down his bar towel and said, "That's enough out of you. That duck was okay. Harrington's would never serve bad food."

Black Dan turned to Lizette, who stood timidly peeking at him from behind the witch. "You inspected this meat when it came in the other day, didn't you, Lizette? Carefully inspected each batch?"

Lizette bit her lip.

Rick put in, "No, that's the day the cop came, remember? I saw that Liz was too busy to tend to it right away, so I went ahead and stuck it in the freezer for her, to get it out of the heat. But I looked it over." He gave Black Dan a weak grin. "Sort of."

Black Dan stared at Lizette. "You mean you accepted delivery of this meat without inspecting it?"

"See, what'd I tell you. I ate bad meat," crowed Tully.

"You don't look sick," growled Rick, "you just look overfed."

"Why you—"

At this moment, Chef Vinnie bustled out to announce to Black Dan, "All my duck meat's disappeared. I just looked in both freezers. Gone. Kaput! Pphhht!" He flung both arms up to the sky in angry frustration.

Tully's tongue darted across his lips, then he shouted, "Somebody's hiding the evidence. You won't get away with it! I want this place closed now!"

"It's obvious to me, boss, he's just trying to give us trouble," stated Rick. He turned to Tully, his eyes narrowed with fury. "You can't muscle in on Harrington's, you fat twerp. *You* probably stole those ducks. Let's go look in his room." He stepped out from behind his bar.

Tully paled at this. When he took a belligerent stance directly in front of Tully, the witch suddenly appreciated how tall and muscular Rick was. Tully darted a glance at Lizette but quailed upon meeting, instead, the steady gaze of the witch. He twitched his shoulders within his jacket as if summoning his dignity and took a step back. "You can't talk to me that way, you—"

Jezebel leaped from the bar to land on Tully's chest, where she clung by her claws to his lapels.

Tully screeched, leaving it unclear to the spectators whether he'd been startled by the cat's pounce or the cat's claws had found a hold in tender flesh. Jezebel clawed her way backwards down his protruding belly and trousers before letting go and landing disdainfully on all four feet. With a complacent yowl, she stalked away. Tully leaned over, whining under his breath, to examine his suit for damage and brush cat hairs from his pants.

As a hand flicked toward his ankle, Lizette gave a shriek. "Stop him, he's got a knife!"

Tully looked surprised at that, said, "Wha—?" and straightened back up. "Shut up, you stupid bimb—" He was prevented from completing his thought by the collision of his mouth with Rick's fist. Tully teetered backwards and would've fallen if he hadn't been neatly fielded by the police officer, who'd abandoned his table to see what was happening over by the bar. He caught Tully under the armpits.

Everyone began shouting at once.

Rick edged over to where Lizette stood frozen in numb bewilderment behind the witch. "You all right?" he asked. Lizette stared up at him, unable to speak, but she did move out from behind the witch.

"Oh, by the way, speaking of ducks," Rick continued. He dug into his trouser pocket. "I've been trying to give this to you, but things've been so hectic . . . you dropped this next to the ducks when they arrived. You were so busy with last minute stuff after I went to tell you to go talk to the cop, you probably didn't notice when it fell." He offered her a key.

Truly stunned now, she inched her upturned palm toward him, into which Rick dropped the key. It lay there in her hand, glistening innocently.

The witch smiled, a long slow smile. "Come, dear," she said softly to Lizette.

Lizette gazed at her blankly. "What? Oh. Oh, yes. Excuse me, Rick."

"Sure. Will I see you later? Maybe after work?"

Lizette answered while still looking at the witch. "No, I don't think—"

"She'll need a little rest, first, Rick dear. Why don't you wait and see," finished the witch for her.

The witch and Lizette walked off together, leaving Black Dan, Chef Vinnie, Rick, and the police officer to sort out what to do with Tully, who was stammering out a long involved explanation of the switchblade they'd found strapped to his ankle.

Behind the hotel manager's desk, the witch stood by while Lizette unlocked her security box and retrieved the package, which she thrust at the witch as if it contained vipers. Then the witch took her by the hand and marched her upstairs to Mr. Tully's room. The door still stood ajar, the way Lizette had left it before being intercepted earlier by the witch.

"What are we doing here?" Lizette whispered hoarsely.

Without answering, the witch scanned the room, located Tully's meager luggage—actually a gym bag containing a few articles of clothing—and after scrubbing with her skirt at the brown paper wrapping of the package, dropped it neatly within the folds of a pair of boxer shorts. She shuddered as she closed the bag with her long fingernails. "Disgusting specimen, that Tully," was all she said.

The sickly smell of raw duckmeat was beginning to fill the room from where it lay defrosting in neat waxed paper packages scattered all over Tully's bed.

Grabbing Lizette by the wrist, the witch peered cautiously into the deserted hallway, then pulled the girl roughly through the door. Together they hastened downstairs.

As they emerged through the door to the outdoor bar, the witch murmured, "Fix your hair, dear. Look as if you just freshened yourself up." She released Lizette's wrist and calmly joined the curious throng now surrounding Tully.

The witch gave Barton Peacock a sharp tap on his shoulder. "Have you forgotten to check out his room?"

"Oh. Oh, yes. Officer, officer. He's checked in at my hotel. We should at least take a look at the room. Maybe something there will help us figure out what kind of game he's been playing." Bar-

ton Peacock led the police officer and the group towards the hotel lobby.

Before very long, the witch was gratified to see a handcuffed Tully being led towards a patrol car that had pulled into the parking lot moments before.

A beaming though silently dazed Black Dan and a triumphant Rick sauntered over to where the witch and Lizette were now sitting at the bar.

With a self-conscious swagger that the witch considered quite pardonable, Rick returned to his post behind the bar and began polishing glasses. "That guy tried to tell us Lizette was mixed up in his scam, whatever it was, do you believe that? What a scumbag." He shook his head.

The witch smiled fondly at him. Rick smiled sheepishly at Lizette, who bit her lip. She was blinking hard, as if something was irritating her eyes. Mrs. Risk murmured, "I'd ask Lizette for a date again if I were you, Rick. I think she feels better now."

Black Dan said to the witch, "We found the missing ducks up in Tully's room, can you imagine that? What in creation would be his interest in our ducks? Peculiar."

"Maybe he had a duck fetish," put in Rick.

Black Dan looked skeptical, but the witch said, "We may never fully understand the actions of Mr. Tully. But then, people do very odd things." She smiled demurely. "I've been accused of that myself."

Black Dan grinned at her. "Yes, well, they unearthed a very interesting package wrapped in brown paper that the cop wouldn't let us see very closely. He seemed excited about it, though. I think we've seen the last of both Tully and him."

"We've also seen the last of your curse. I can positively reassure you that you've broken that curse and you may consider it no longer in effect against your entire family forever."

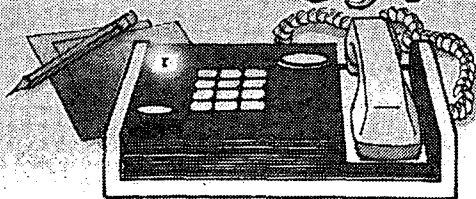
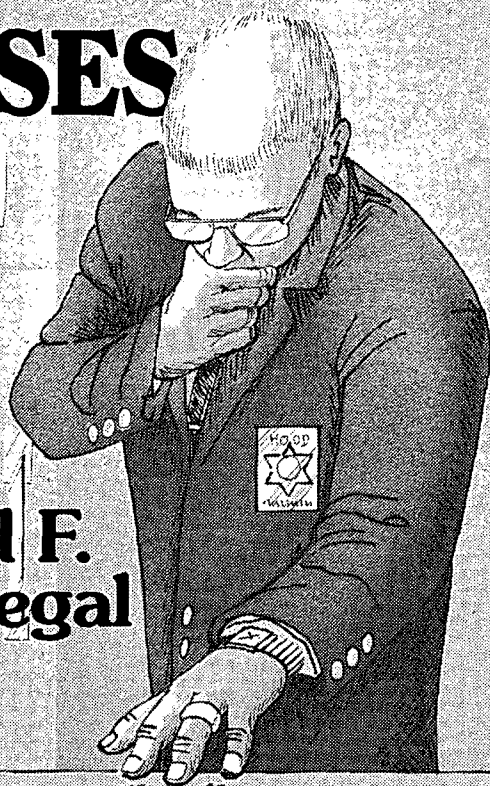
Black Dan's eyes widened. "Is that so?" He gazed with pleasure at the people and scenery surrounding them. He smacked a palm flat against the bar. "Break out a bottle of our best champagne, Rick. I'm going to call my wife and ask her to join us. The curse is over!"

The witch accepted a glass. "Rest assured, Dan Harrington. I would've hated to see such a pleasant establishment leave Wyndham-by-the-Sea. And I will be most delighted to meet Mrs. Harrington."

FICTION

UNNATURAL CAUSES

by
**Richard F.
McGonegal**



ODBERT

Illustration by Jim Odbert

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Sheriff Francis Hood hated the scent of death. He stood in the doorway of the second story master bedroom and frowned at the corpse.

The body of Angie McCaskill was tucked beneath the bedcovers of a king-size four poster. She appeared to be asleep—her expression dreamy, her body in repose—but the putrescent stench permeating the room and the slight greenish-silver cast of her complexion confirmed there would be no awakening.

Hood's frown twisted into a grimace of disgust and recognition. He had met Angie McCaskill once, when she was assigned by the court to defend an accused burglar Hood had apprehended. She had argued well but had lost the case.

The sheriff watched from his vantage point as the county's veteran medical examiner, Dr. Loeffelman, carefully turned down the bedcovers, exposing a long, shapely body clad in a white nightgown. Nothing more—no bruises, no wounds, no blood—was revealed.

"What do you think?" Hood asked.

"No idea," Loeffelman replied, with customary candor. He rubbed the prominent cleft of his chin. "Probably natural

causes, but she's only what—mid-thirties, maybe?"

"How long's she been dead?"

"More than a day, less than two." He slowly began circumnavigating the bed, visually inspecting the corpse. "I understand her husband came home this afternoon from a weekend trip and found her."

Hood made no reply. He scrutinized the room. It bore no evidence of burglary, ransacking, or struggle. He allowed his gaze to wander beyond the window where the bright sunlight of a cloudless Sunday afternoon belied the crisp temperature outdoors. Although March waned, a lingering cold front refused to relinquish its grip.

"The husband say anything about medical problems?" Loeffelman asked without looking up.

"Haven't talked to him yet," Hood replied. "I came up here first."

"Why don't you find out?" Loeffelman suggested. "Maybe we can skip an autopsy and let him call a funeral home."

Hood knew his aversion to the odor of death was no secret to the medical examiner. He knew Loeffelman was extending an opportunity to retreat, and he appreciated the offer.

"Okay," Hood said, implying a thank you.

Loeffelman nodded, then added, "And find out who her doctor was—I may need to look at her medical records."

Lester Quigg, the deputy who had been posted at the front door to monitor any comings and goings, directed his boss to a door off the kitchen that led to a basement recreation room. Hood descended into a large, finished area complete with a wet bar, a billiard table, and a tasteful grouping of furniture facing a massive brick fireplace.

The husband, John McCaskill, slumped forward on a small sofa. His chin rested on his palms, his elbows were propped on his knees, and his thinning hair was disheveled, as if he had been running his hands through it repeatedly. Hood judged him to be about forty. He wore a beige cable-knit sweater, bluejeans, and hiking boots.

Across from him, Hood's chief deputy, Gus "Wally" Walendorf, was seated uncomfortably erect in an armless ladderback chair. Wally's legs were crossed, his long arms dangled awkwardly at his sides, and his notebook was perched precariously on his knee.

The deputy rose and made introductions. McCaskill nodded

weakly but neither stood nor extended a handshake.

"I'm sorry about your wife," Hood said.

McCaskill's head bobbed in acknowledgment.

"Did she have any medical condition, any illness that might account for this?" Hood asked.

McCaskill shook his head. "She had asthma, but it wasn't . . ." he paused, "you know, that bad." He seemed drained by grief, and his whispered words appeared to sap what little energy remained.

"Did she have a doctor?" Hood asked.

The telephone rang. Hood and Wally looked at the wall phone behind the bar, then at McCaskill. Again it rang.

"I don't want to talk to anyone right now," McCaskill said.

It rang a third time.

"Could be for us," Wally ventured.

"Is there an answering machine?" Hood asked.

A fourth ring resounded.

"In the kitchen," McCaskill answered.

The ringing stopped.

"I'll check the message," Hood said. "What about your wife's doctor?" he asked again.

"Dr. Weller," McCaskill said.

"Tommy Weller?"

McCaskill nodded.

"I know him," Hood said. "Good man." He paused. "I need to talk with my deputy for a minute, okay?"

McCaskill made no reply.

The sheriff led Wally upstairs to the kitchen, then closed the basement door to eliminate any chance of being overheard. "Looks like he's taking it pretty hard," Hood observed.

"Yeah," Wally said.

"Has he called anybody—parents, relatives?"

"Not yet."

Lester appeared from the hallway leading to the kitchen. "Phone rang," he said. "I didn't know whether to get it or not, then the machine kicked on."

Hood located the telephone and answering machine on a small desk opposite the stove and sink. The answering machine displayed a red numeral one in its counter window. Hood pressed the message button and listened.

"Hi, Angie," the recording began, "this is Cam." Hood recognized the voice of Cameron Carter, a legal sharpshooter who owned the small, well-respected law firm that employed Angie McCaskill. "It seems our client has changed his mind again, so you can ignore the message I left yesterday. Have a restful day. Looks like tomor-

row may be the start of a hectic week."

The machine beeped, and the tape clicked to a halt.

Hood stared at the red one in the message counter.

"What?" Wally asked, sensing his boss's preoccupation.

"The husband tell you anything?" Hood inquired.

Wally shrugged. "Not a lot." Wally related that John McCaskill—a sales manager for a local automobile dealership—had attended a convention in Kansas City. He had left home after dinner on Friday evening and had driven to the Executive Inn where the event was being held. He had returned home about three P.M. today, Sunday.

According to Wally, the husband said he had noticed the odor as soon as he entered the house from the attached garage. He traced it to the upstairs bedroom, discovered his wife was dead, and called 911.

Wally said that he and Lester had responded together and had arrived about ten minutes after the call had been received. Wally escorted the husband to the basement den and had stayed with him. Lester had posted himself at the front door to direct Loeffelman and the sheriff when they arrived.

Hood listened attentively, then turned his attention back

to the answering machine. He pressed the message button again. The tape rewound, replayed Carter's communication, and clicked off.

"What's up?" Wally inquired, aware that something had triggered his boss's suspicions.

"I was just wondering..." Hood began, interrupting himself when Loeffelman appeared in the kitchen.

"Francis," the medical examiner said, "there's something upstairs I think you'd better have a look at."

Hood heard the unmistakable gravity in Loeffelman's tone and followed immediately. Wally and Lester understood—without being instructed—that they were to return to their respective posts.

Hood recounted, as he trailed the medical examiner up the stairs, what the husband had said about his wife's asthma and the name of her doctor.

When Loeffelman made no reply, Hood added, "Can you give me a better fix on the time of death?"

"Can't get too precise without an autopsy," Loeffelman replied. He paused at the top of the stairs and faced Hood. "I'd say she died around midnight Friday, give or take a couple of hours."

Hood nodded.

Loeffelman entered the master bedroom and directed the sheriff to an open doorway. Hood approached, peered into the adjoining bathroom, and focused on the body lying on a royal blue oval rug between the tub and vanity. "Dead?" he asked.

"Yes," Loeffelman said.

Hood stepped into the bathroom and knelt beside the corpse. He reached out and gently stroked the fur of the lifeless Sheltie.

"It's either one hell of a coincidence," Loeffelman said, "or we can rule out natural causes."

Hood rose and stared at the medical examiner. "Any wounds?" he asked. His expression registered both pain and puzzlement.

"None," Loeffelman said. "No bumps, bruises, punctures—nothing. Just like the wife." He paused. "My guess is some kind of toxin."

"Poison," Hood speculated.

"Probably gas," Loeffelman said. "If it was something they ate, they would have gotten sick. You don't sleep through stomach poisoning. My guess is carbon monoxide."

Hood thought immediately of the attached garage, and questions flooded his mind. Was the wife's car parked there? Was the ignition still on? Was it out

of gas? Could the exhaust have seeped from the garage to the upstairs bedroom? Was her death a suicide?

"Could be a faulty furnace," Loeffelman said. "We could be breathing the stuff right now. We'd better turn it off, then get somebody from the crime lab out here right away."

"I'll take care of it," Hood said. He wanted Sandra—who headed the state highway patrol's lab—on the scene, not some novice assistant.

He hurried downstairs, located the thermostat, and switched the fan off. Then he called Sandra's home number. She complained mildly about being summoned on a Sunday afternoon, but once Hood explained the scenario, she quizzed him enough to determine what equipment to bring and promised a hasty arrival.

Hood replaced the receiver and located the doorway off the kitchen that led to the attached garage. The two-bay structure he entered was clean and meticulously ordered. It housed a black Chevrolet Suburban with darkly tinted rear glass and a red Mazda Miata convertible. Hood walked between the vehicles and peered into the side windows of each. No key was in either ignition. He placed his hand on the Suburban's hood,

which was warm, then on the Miata's hood, which was not.

He noted that the garage was located on the opposite end of the house from the master bedroom. He surveyed the ceiling and walls for any ductwork that might carry exhaust fumes. One wall was lined with a long workbench and sheets of pegboard displaying a variety of tools. Along the remaining walls he saw a lawn mower, a wheelbarrow, a chest freezer, two ten-speed bicycles, and a large plastic trash can. No ductwork or vents were evident.

Hood left the garage, crossed the kitchen, and descended once more into the basement. McCaskill and Wally were seated as they had been previously, each looking uncomfortable in his own way amid the awkward silence.

"Mr. McCaskill," Hood said, "I need to ask you a few questions."

McCaskill's weary expression wrinkled into a frown, but he made no objection.

"Did you and your wife have a dog?"

"Shelley," McCaskill said. He brightened momentarily, then—reading Hood's somber look—asked, "Where is she?"

"Upstairs," Hood said. "I'm sorry. She's dead."

"How? What do you mean, dead?" McCaskill asked, his tone a combination of grief and confusion. "What's happening?"

"We think it might be carbon monoxide poisoning. Maybe from the furnace," Hood explained. "I turned the blower off, and someone's on the way to check it."

McCaskill shook his head but said nothing.

"I know you went over this with my deputy," Hood said, "but I need to clarify a few things. It may help us understand what happened."

"Okay," McCaskill replied, a reluctant whisper.

"I understand you left home Friday night. What time was that?"

"After dinner. About seven, I think."

"Any guess as to what time your wife might have gone to bed?"

"She always went to bed early," McCaskill said. "She was a creature of habit." As he spoke, his voice became more animated, as if recalling her alive cheered him. "She always walked the dog at eight thirty, like clockwork. Then she came home, brushed her teeth and washed her face, and was in bed by nine."

"She have any trouble sleeping—insomnia, anything like that?" Hood asked.

"No," McCaskill said, his tone a mixture of admiration and envy. "She'd be out before her head hit the pillow, sleep all night, and be up at five thirty." He paused. "Me, I'm a night owl."

"I understand you spent the weekend in Kansas City. What time did you get to the hotel Friday?"

McCaskill hesitated. "I don't know." He paused. "It was late."

"How late?"

"Around eleven."

"But it's, what, about a two and a half, three hour drive?"

"More like three," McCaskill said.

"Did you stop somewhere?"

"I had a flat tire," he said. "What's with all the questions?" he added, his tone defensive.

"Get it fixed?" Hood pressed.

"Yeah," McCaskill said, betraying a trace of defiance. "I stopped at a service station. I don't remember which one."

"I see," Hood said. He paused. "Did you call your wife after you checked in at the hotel?"

McCaskill hesitated. "No," he said finally. "Why?"

"Just wondered," Hood said. He didn't want to say he wondered if Angie McCaskill was still alive around eleven P.M. Instead, he said, "Whenever I go

out of town, my wife wants me to call to make sure I got there okay."

"She would've been asleep by then," McCaskill countered.

"So you said," Hood replied. "And you got home today, what, about three?"

"About," McCaskill replied. "I didn't look at the clock."

"Then what?" Hood asked. "Try to remember everything you did in the order you did it."

"I came in . . ."

"You parked in the garage?" Hood asked, trying to prompt a more detailed sequence of events.

"Yeah, I came in and . . ."

"Through the kitchen?" Hood interrupted.

"Yeah," McCaskill said. "I smelled something. I wasn't sure what it was. It just smelled awful. I kind of traced it down the hall and up the stairs. It kept getting stronger. Then I went into the bedroom and . . ." This time McCaskill interrupted himself. His voice choked and he buried his face in his hands.

Hood waited until McCaskill had regained his composure. "What did you do after you found her?"

"I went down to the kitchen and called 911. I couldn't stay up there."

"And while . . ." Hood began, halting as Lester descended the

stairs, approached, and informed the sheriff of Sandra's arrival.

"I'll be right up," Hood told Lester. He turned his attention back to McCaskill. "One more thing," Hood said. "Did you notice whether there were any messages on the answering machine?"

McCaskill pondered the question. "I don't remember," he said. "I think I hit the rewind button while I was hanging up the phone. My hands were shaking so badly."

"Do you remember what the message counter said before you hit the rewind button?"

"No," McCaskill said. "I don't think I looked."

Hood stared at him. Although the sheriff was not entirely satisfied by McCaskill's answers, nothing in the man's expression indicated that he was lying. Hood turned and followed Lester upstairs.

Sandra was waiting impatiently in the hallway. In the laboratory she customarily wore her hair pinned up and shielded her clothing with a bulky white smock. Today, in her haste, she remained in her typical Sunday afternoon ensemble—a University of Missouri sweatshirt, faded blue-jeans, and white leather tennis shoes. Her hair was tied back in a long, impromptu pony tail.

He knew that she probably felt she looked unprofessional. Hood thought she looked stunning—an observation he allowed himself to enjoy with guiltless detachment. He was a happily married father of four who appreciated beauty, but was not tempted by it.

Neither made remarks about her appearance. Instead Sandra asked, "Where do I start?"

Hood outlined what he knew and why he and Loeffelman suspected carbon monoxide poisoning. He explained his inspection of the garage and why he believed engine exhaust was unlikely.

She decided the furnace would be her priority, switched on the thermostat, and headed for the basement.

The sheriff told Lester to contact headquarters and have someone at the department gather any available information on John McCaskill. "And have someone call the Executive Inn in Kansas City," he added. "I want to know when he checked in and out, and whether he made any calls." He paused. "First, though, take Wally aside and tell him I need to run out for about half an hour, but under no circumstances is he to let McCaskill leave before I get back."

"Where you headed?" Lester asked.

"I need to see a good lawyer," Hood replied.

The sheriff radioed dispatch from his cruiser and obtained Cameron Carter's home address and telephone number. He used his cellular telephone to inform Carter of his impending visit. Despite Carter's questions, Hood divulged nothing about its purpose.

When Hood arrived, Carter greeted him at the door and led him to an elegant study. It boasted a massive walnut desk, two chairs separated by a butler's table, three walls lined with well-stocked walnut bookcases, and an exterior wall of french doors accented with forest green draperies.

The room suited Carter, who was very stylish, very handsome, and very wealthy. Women often described him as charming; men rarely mentioned him.

"Drink?" Carter offered.

Hood declined with a wave of his hand.

Carter poured some of the contents from a decanter into a crystal snifter. "So what's this all about, Francis?" Carter asked. "Did one of my clients do something to get on your bad side?"

Hood shook his head.

Carter recognized the seriousness of the sheriff's demeanor. His smile and banter

vanished. "I'm listening," he said.

"I understand Angie McCaskill was one of your associates," Hood said.

Carter caught the past tense. "What's happened?"

"I'm sorry to have to tell you," Hood said. "She's dead."

Carter closed his eyes, as if absorbing the news. "How? Where?"

"At home," Hood replied. "She died in her sleep late Friday or early Saturday. We think it was some kind of toxic gas, probably carbon monoxide."

Carter sat down, propped an elbow on a chair arm, and rested his forehead against his fingertips. "Why wasn't I told?"

"We just found out," Hood said. "Her husband was away on business this weekend. He got back this afternoon and found the body."

Carter grimaced but made no reply.

"We think the gas came from a faulty furnace, but we're checking every possibility. I need to know if she mentioned any problems lately. What was her mood? Was she depressed?"

Carter hesitated. "She was having some problems," he said. "Who doesn't? But if you're asking if she was suicidal, the answer is absolutely not."

"What sort of problems?"

Carter studied the sheriff a moment. "You've met John?" he asked.

Hood nodded.

"Normally I wouldn't get into this," Carter said, "but under the circumstances, it's not like I'm betraying a confidence." He paused. "She and John weren't getting along. She was considering a separation."

"Do you know why?"

"Angie was one of my best associates," Carter explained. "I discussed a lot of cases with her—sometimes on the phone, sometimes over lunch, sometimes we'd work late at the office and have dinner brought in. John was very suspicious."

"He thought you were having an affair," Hood said.

"He accused her of that, yes."

"And were you?"

Carter stared at him, his expression registering both surprise and admiration at the boldness of the question. "No," he answered.

"It makes no difference to me," Hood said. "An affair's not a crime."

"You think there's been a crime?" Carter asked.

Hood hesitated. "I don't know. All I know is that, with or without your help, I intend to find how and why she died."

Carter stared at him a moment. "Okay," he began, his

tone neither challenging nor defensive, simply explanatory. "I know I've got a reputation. I'm a bachelor, and I enjoy the company of women. But I got where I am by learning from my mistakes, and one thing I learned a long time ago is not to mix business and pleasure. Angie was a good attorney, a good associate. She also was very attractive and, under other circumstances, I might have made a play for her." He paused. "But I'll tell you something—she had class. She would have turned me down, or anyone else, for that matter, as long as she was married. She wouldn't have violated that contract."

Hood knew Carter was a consummate courtroom showman. The attorney had built his career by playing a role and arguing his case. He was both proficient and convincing. The sheriff tried to evaluate his sincerity. He could not.

"You called her yesterday," Hood said, more a statement than a question.

"Yes," Carter replied without hesitation. "Yesterday and again this afternoon. I got the machine." He paused. "How'd you know?"

"I heard the message today. Did you leave one Saturday, too?"

"Yes," Cameron said. "We've got a client in a divorce case who can't seem to make up his mind. His wife wants out of the marriage because she says he lacks commitment. How's that for irony?" He paused. "Almost as ironic as leaving messages for someone who's dead."

"Could be a good way to throw a lawman off the scent," Hood observed. He smiled slightly.

Carter pondered a moment. "I hadn't thought of that." An expression of admiration traced his lips. "You should have been a lawyer, Francis."

"I like my job," Hood replied. "Thanks for your time."

Carter accompanied the sheriff to the door. As he opened it, Carter asked, "Whatever you find out, you'll let me know?"

Hood nodded.

The sheriff felt he had learned little from his visit with Carter. When he returned to the McCaskills' house, he found out that the others had accomplished even less.

Lester reported that McCaskill had telephoned his sister and was eager to leave so they could begin making funeral arrangements, headquarters had not yet responded concerning the husband's stay in Kansas City, and Sandra had finished her inspection in the basement and had gone upstairs.

Hood climbed the staircase. He found Sandra standing just inside the bathroom adjoining the master bedroom.

She was staring at the lifeless Sheltie, but she turned as he approached and Hood saw the unmistakable sadness in her eyes.

"The furnace is clean," she said.

"No carbon monoxide?"

"Not a trace," she answered.

"Now what?"

"If it was gas and it didn't come through the ductwork, it would have had to originate somewhere up here."

"How?" Hood asked.

"I don't know, Francis," she said, betraying a trace of frustration. She moved nimbly around the Sheltie's corpse as she peered into the sink, then lifted the toilet seat. "Wish I could keep my bathroom this clean," she said, a weak attempt to lift the somberness permeating their collective mood. She pulled aside the shower curtain, revealing an unsightly ring of scum. "Oops," she said, "spoke too soon."

She smiled faintly, then focused her attention on the bathtub. Hood watched as her gaze swept from fixture to fixture; then she knelt in front of the oak vanity beneath the sink and opened its double doors.

"Bingo," she said. "Found it."

Hood stopped and peered over her shoulder. The vanity housed rolls of toilet paper, boxes of facial tissues, assorted bottles of cleaning supplies, soap—everything one might expect. "Found what?" he ventured.

She pointed to a plastic bottle. "That's liquid drain cleaner," she said. "It contains chlorine. And that," she added, indicating another plastic bottle, "is ammonia. If you mix those, let's say, to clear a clogged drain, you get chlorine gas—very toxic."

Hood rubbed his chin. "Don't most people know not to do that," he said, more a statement than a question.

"Most people," Sandra affirmed, "but it happens. There was a story in the paper just last week about someone in Michigan who died after pouring these in a clogged sink."

"This woman was an attorney," Hood protested.

"So," Sandra said. "Just because you're a whiz in the courtroom doesn't mean you know how to clean a bathroom. She probably had a cleaning woman do her house. You think she scrubbed the toilet and scoured the sink? My guess is she was peeved about the clogged tub and poured in the nastiest smelling stuff she

could get her hands on. Then she went to bed and the gas killed her, but the stuff also dissolved the clog. That accounts for the ring in the tub."

"Can you test for it?"

"The gas would have dissipated by now," Sandra said, "but I can test the residue in the tub."

"Let's do it," Hood said.

"I need some stuff from the lab," she said. She rose and started for the door.

"Wait," Hood commanded. He pointed to a portion of the rug where she had been kneeling. "What's that?"

Sandra returned and scrutinized the stain—a light spot about the diameter of a dime near the edge of the royal blue oval. "Looks like bleach," she said. "Probably from the drain cleaner. It has the same chemicals. She must have spilled some when . . ."

"It wasn't there before," Hood interrupted.

"Before what?"

"Before," he repeated. "When I was up here an hour or so ago."

"You're sure?"

"Positive," he said. "I was kneeling right beside the dog. There was no stain. I would have noticed it." He paused. "How long does it take bleach to discolor something?"

"It works instantly if it's undiluted," she said. "If it was in the drain cleaner, I don't know."

"What's more likely, an hour and a half or a day and a half?"

"Not a day and a half, surely." She stared at him. "What are you thinking?"

"I'm thinking it was spilled this afternoon," he said.

She pondered a moment, her expression revealing puzzlement. "But Loeffelman said she died . . ."

"I know," Hood interrupted.

"It doesn't add up," she said.

"I know," Hood reiterated. "Not yet." He paused. "You'd better get started."

He accompanied her through the master bedroom and into the hallway, where they encountered Lester trudging up the stairs.

"He was there," Lester said. He opened his notebook. "The Executive Inn said he arranged for late check-in and arrived at eleven twenty Friday night. He checked out at twelve ten this afternoon." He flipped a page. "And he only made one call—to this number."

"He called home?" Hood asked.

"Uh-huh."

"What time?"

"That's what's weird," Lester said. "It wasn't until five past

one A.M.—more than an hour after he checked in.”

Hood smiled. “Now it’s beginning to add up.”

“How?” Sandra asked.

“See if this makes sense,” Hood said. “The husband leaves the house about seven Friday night, but he doesn’t leave town. He comes back later, eight thirty when his wife always walks the dog, goes upstairs, stoppers the tub, and pours in drain cleaner and ammonia. He knows she never showers at night, and even if she uses the bathroom to wash her face and brush her teeth, she won’t notice anything amiss because the shower curtain is closed. After he rigs the tub, he drives to Kansas City. He waits until he thinks the gas has done its job, then calls home. If she answers, he still has time to return home, make some excuse, and get the stuff out of the tub.”

“Won’t work,” Sandra said. She shook her head. “The wife would smell the gas when she got home from walking the dog, at least when she went upstairs.”

Hood pondered her objection. “Okay,” he conceded. “What if he rigged it so the drain cleaner and ammonia bottles were in the tub but the liquids weren’t mixed until later, after she was asleep?”

“How?” Sandra asked. “The bottles would have to be opened or punctured or something, and if they were, she would have smelled the ammonia even if it hadn’t mixed with the drain cleaner.”

Hood’s expression revealed his frustration. “Okay,” he said, “so we don’t have all the answers yet. But I think he replaced the tape in the answering machine and removed the bottles from the tub after he got back today. And I think there was a hole in the bottle that dripped on the bathroom rug.” He paused. “What we need to do is find that tape and those bottles.”

“Maybe he dumped them somewhere already,” Lester ventured.

“I don’t think so,” Hood said. “There wasn’t time if he left Kansas City after noon. Besides, there was too much risk a neighbor might see him leave again after he arrived home. No, I think he never anticipated being a suspect. I think he stashed them somewhere and planned to dispose of them after we . . .” He halted his conjecture as Wally appeared on the stairs.

“He wants to leave,” Wally said. “He’s pretty insistent.”

“Stall him,” Hood ordered. “Just give us another . . .”

"I don't know," Wally said. "He's . . ."

"Stall him, I said," Hood commanded. "I don't care if you have to handcuff him to the furniture."

Wally exhaled a long breath. He turned and mumbled as he descended.

"We're going to need a warrant," Hood said. He turned to Lester. "Find Judge Payne—at home, on the golf course, wherever—and tell him what we've got here. I want a warrant to search for the phone tape and those bottles."

As Lester departed, Sandra said, "I'd better get going, too." She paused. "You know, there are still a lot of loose ends here, a lot of things we can't prove."

"I know," Hood said. "Believe me, I know."

The sheriff was in the garage minutes later peering into the large plastic trash can when Wally and McCaskill entered.

"I'm sorry," Wally began. "He insisted . . ."

"What's going on?" McCaskill shouted.

"I was just throwing something away," Hood answered.

"You're going through my trash," McCaskill said. "You can't do that."

"I've been all through your house this afternoon," Hood countered. "I was just . . ."

"You can't search my trash," McCaskill protested. "I know my rights. Don't forget, I'm married to an attorney."

"Not any more," Hood said, his tone quiet but severe.

McCaskill glared at him. His eyes were wild. "I'll have your badge," he said. "That's illegal."

"Homicide's illegal," Hood countered.

"Are you accusing me . . ." He halted and shook his head. "You're crazy." He paused. "I'm leaving." He started for the Suburban.

"Take the Miata," Hood advised.

McCaskill said nothing. As he removed his keys from his pocket and reached for the driver's door of the Suburban, he noticed the rear tire was flat.

The sheriff saw the flash of panic in McCaskill's expression. "Looks like another flat," Hood observed. "I'll give you a hand. Open up the back."

The keys jangled. Hood focused on the uncontrollable trembling of McCaskill's hands, then on the confusion registered in the man's eyes. "I wanna talk to a lawyer," McCaskill said.

"I think that's a good idea."

Almost two hours passed before everyone reassembled in the garage. Hood was armed

not only with a search warrant, but with the results of Sandra's tests. Her analyses proved that the residue in the tub contained both drain cleaner and ammonia, and that the bleached spot on the bathroom rug was created by the liquid drain cleaner.

McCaskill surrendered his keys, on the advice of his attorney. After the evidence was found in the Suburban, he was arrested, advised of his rights, and taken to jail by Wally and Lester. His lawyer followed.

Hood watched as Sandra extracted from the Suburban the telephone cassette tape and the two plastic bottles—one labeled liquid drain cleaner and the other labeled ammonia—and sealed each item in a separate plastic bag. The bottles were identical to the ones found in the bathroom vanity except they were empty and had been punctured at the bottom.

"So," Sandra said, "you were right about his returning to the house, placing the bottles in the tub, and leaving."

Hood nodded.

"What I still don't understand," Sandra said, "is why the drain cleaner and ammonia didn't leak immediately and create a gas she could smell. Did he plug the holes with something that dissolved later?"

"Maybe," Hood said, "but I don't think so."

"How then?"

Hood pointed to the chest freezer. "I think he froze them," he said. "That would account for why they didn't leak immediately and why she didn't smell either one when she returned home. After she went to sleep, the contents slowly melted and created the gas that killed her."

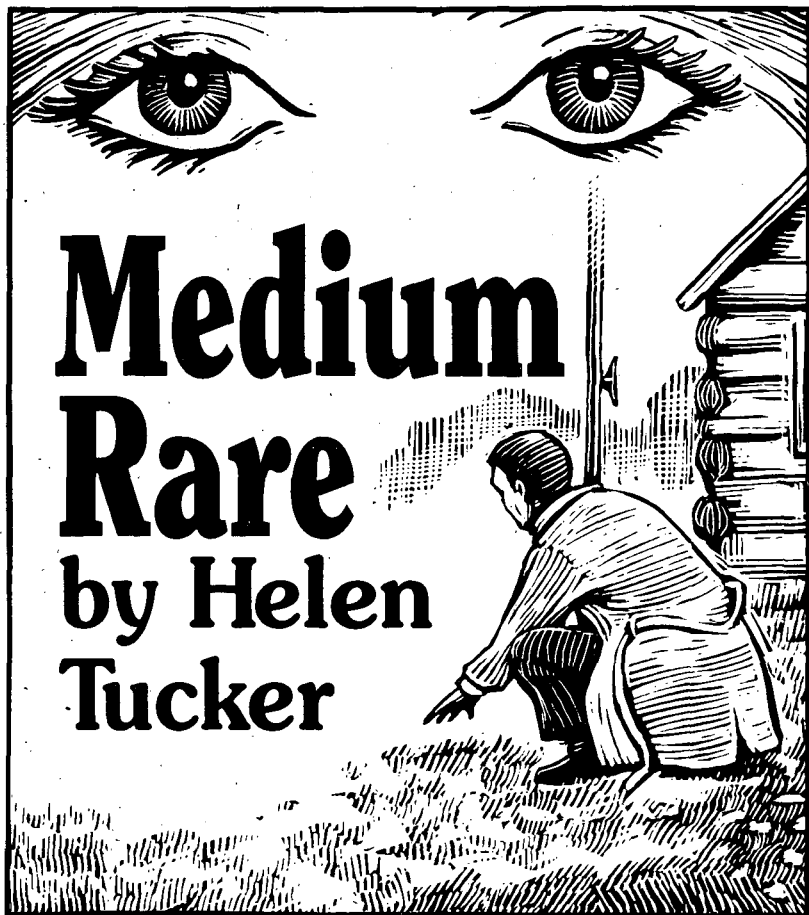
Sandra placed the bags of evidence in a case and closed it.

"One more question?" she ventured.

"Shoot," Hood said.

"Any idea what caused the flat tire?"

Hood smiled. "Would you believe me if I said it was just another slow leak?"



Medium Rare by Helen Tucker

She was an attractive, intelligent, fascinating woman. But he had to admit, to himself at least, that the first time she came to his office he thought she was a nut. "About three sandwiches short

of a picnic," was the way the desk sergeant had described her when announcing by phone that she was on her way up to see Detective Captain Max Ballew. "Sorry, captain," the sergeant apologized, "but she

asked for you by name. Said she wouldn't talk to anybody else."

Now on the rare occasions when she came to see Max, every member of the force looked at her with awe, some even with open admiration. And there were no more sly, exchanged glances when Max asked one of the men to "see if Mrs. Antonini is available, and if so, send a squad car for her."

He had just sent for her, and for the usual reason: she was often a great help in solving seemingly unsolvable cases.

Yet every time she came in, scenes from the first meeting inadvertently flashed across Max's mind. After the desk sergeant's description, "three sandwiches short," Max had expected a crazy old bat to come flying into his office complaining about some trivial matter like a neighbor's dog barking all night, or an imagined prowler or peeping Tom on her property. He was totally unprepared for the poised, appealing looking woman who came in and asked in a low, throaty voice, "Are you Captain Ballew?"

"Yes," he said, "what can I do for you, Mrs. . . ." He was staring openly. She was tall, only two or three inches shorter than he, and he was six two. She had shoulder-length silvery blonde hair, combed se-

verely back and held at the nape of her neck by a wide silver barrette. She had large brown eyes fringed with long black lashes, a tiny sprinkling of freckles across her patrician nose, and a wide mouth that smiled easily; her only makeup was a light rose lipstick. She wore a black and white plaid skirt and white turtleneck sweater, both of which showed off to perfection her excellent figure. Although she didn't look it, Max guessed her age to be somewhere between forty and forty-five (actually forty-two, he learned later).

"Antonini," she said. "Sylvia Antonini. May I sit down, Captain Ballew?"

He had expected to remain standing through what was to be only a very brief interview: hear her complaint, promise to do what he could, then send her happily on her way. Instead of the quick brush-off, however, he said, "Please do," pointed to the chair on the other side of his desk, and sat down himself. He saw that she was staring as curiously at him now as he had at her, and what she saw was a fifty-eight-year-old man who did not look but was beginning to feel his age. He had sand-colored hair, mostly gray now, bright blue eyes, and a ruddy complexion. What she couldn't see but might have wondered

about was the fact that he was a widower who lived alone in an apartment, a detective who had worked his way through the ranks from patrolman, a man who devoted almost all his waking hours to his job.

"What can I do for you, Mrs. Antonini?" he repeated.

"I hope I may be able to do something for you, captain," she said. "You're in charge of the Landower case, aren't you?"

Now he was puzzled. "Yes, I am. Do you have information concerning that case?"

She hesitated only slightly, then said, "Yes, I do. I think I do."

Nadine Landower, a peppery, birdlike little woman in her early sixties who had been a member of the city council for a dozen years, had some time ago announced that she was a candidate for mayor. About a month later she had disappeared and not a trace of her had been found, nor a single clue as to what might have happened to her. A widow who lived alone in a big house, she had a housekeeper by day who told the police that Mrs. Landower had left for her office at eight thirty that morning, as she always did, but according to her secretary at the real estate company, she never arrived at the office. Asked if

there had been any strangers at the door or outside the house, the housekeeper said no, nobody. Any phone calls? No, nothing. Did Mrs. Landower appear upset, angry, or agitated when she left that morning? "No," the housekeeper said, "she was like always, cheerful and in a hurry."

Max and his detectives—for that matter, the entire force—had questioned everyone who knew Mrs. Landower or had business dealings with her, even the other candidates for the office of mayor. They had searched the town, the county, even distant parts of the state when tips (that always turned out to be worthless) indicated they should.

Nothing. Zilch.

Now here was this woman, Sylvia Antonini, sitting in front of him calmly saying she had information. "Why haven't you come forward sooner?" Max asked with a slightly forced smile to counteract the accusatory tone of voice.

"Because I didn't see it until last night."

"See what?"

"I dreamed about Mrs. Landower," she said, her eyes narrowing as she talked as though squinting to see clearly again what she saw in the dream. "I don't know why; I never even met the woman. But I saw her

in the dream. She was beside a log cabin, standing and looking to the top of a tall pole."

Max could hardly keep his disgust within bounds. "You *dreamed* you saw her and you expect me . . ."

"Don't underestimate my dream, please. Such dreams in the past have proved very significant."

"What are you, some kind of fortune teller, or seer? You have a crystal ball, I suppose." He was struggling just to be civil.

"No, I don't tell fortunes and I don't have a crystal ball." She looked at him as though he were a child who must have facts explained simply and clearly. "I guess you could call me a seer, although sometimes I think I feel more than I see."

"What do you call yourself, a psychic?"

"Yes. A psychic or medium."

He was quiet for a minute, digesting this bit of information. She certainly didn't look like those so-called psychics he had seen on TV commercials, the overly madeup, sexily dressed, overage bimbos who begged people to call them and get their lives straightened out, their pocketbooks lined, and their loves in the sack. Except for the rather flamboyant silver blonde hair, she looked very much a proper, sedate lady.

"Unless you have received more accurate information, I think you should check this out," she said. "I would almost be willing to stake my life that Mrs. Landower is at a log cabin somewhere. And she's alone."

He had to admit that it had been at least two weeks since he'd had anything approximating information, accurate or otherwise. But to send officers out because some self-proclaimed psychic had a dream . . . my God! they'd be saying *he* was three sandwiches short of a picnic. He stood up, indicating that the conversation was over, and thanked her for coming in.

Although he dismissed the woman, he couldn't dismiss what she had said quite as easily. He thought about it all day. Sylvia Antonini didn't look or talk like a fool even though much of what she had said seemed foolish to him. But maybe . . .

Late that afternoon, he remembered having noticed what looked like a deserted log cabin on Highway 70 about five miles from town, so instead of going home when he left the office, he drove to the cabin. Yes, there was a tall pole right beside it, a telephone pole. The cabin was deserted: of people, furniture, any sign of life except a lone mouse. And, of course, there.

was no one standing beside the telephone pole.

Disgusted with himself for wasting time, he went home.

The next morning he had a call from Sylvia Antonini. "Captain Ballew? I thought I should tell you. I had the same dream again last night, and it was even clearer. The log cabin was still there and the pole—it's a flagpole, by the way—but Mrs. Landower was lying beside the pole this time, not standing."

"Thank you for calling," he said abruptly and hung up.

She called back immediately. "Please, captain, don't write me off as some loony dame who keeps annoying you. I am *sure* of what I say. I've seen it too clearly to ignore it. The cabin is on a hillside with an American flag flying beside it. Mrs. Landower is lying, as still as death, beneath the flag." This time she hung up first.

Cabin on a hillside, flag . . . there was a Boy Scout hut, a log cabin, about ten miles from town on a hillside, and although he'd never noticed, there might well be a flag beside the hut. Thinking he must be as crazy as the Antonini woman, he left the office and drove to the hut. It also was deserted. The Scouts used it for meetings and picnics and camp-outs. He peered through

the windows and saw a paucity of furniture, some cooking equipment in the kitchen, and, folded on a kitchen counter, an American flag. Beside the cabin, with ropes dangling from the top, was a twenty-foot flagpole. But there was no woman lying beneath it, only russet autumn leaves and pine straw that had fallen from nearby trees. With his foot, he pushed some of the leaves aside and saw what appeared to be freshly turned earth. Digging a little with his hands, he unearthed a shoe attached to a foot, attached to . . .

He went back to his car and radioed for sheriff's deputies (since he was out of city jurisdiction) to come and bring shovels.

The decomposed body of a woman was dug up from a shallow grave. Dental records later showed it was Nadine Landower.

When confronted by reporters for the morning paper, Max gave credit where credit was due and the banner headline stated:

PSYCHIC SENDS COPS TO PLACE
WHERE MURDERED WOMAN BURIED

followed by a story that gave details of Sylvia Antonini's dream and the results. Max did not begrudge her the publicity

nor the implied praise for having solved a case that had baffled the police force for a month. But the murderer had not been caught.

The next time she came to the station, he greeted her with no hesitation, no thought of her being a nut. In his own mind he had resolved the ESP/psychic/dream-interpretation thing to his own satisfaction: some people had a talent for drawing, some for singing, some for composing, some for writing, some for mathematics and science. Why shouldn't it be possible that some also had a talent for seeing into the future or interpreting signs that meant nothing to the average person, or feeling things that others didn't even sense? (Hadn't Sylvia Antonini, after all, said sometimes she thought of herself as a feeler rather than a seer?)

"Captain Ballew, nice to see you again."

"A pleasure, Mrs. Antonini." He shook her outstretched hand and gave her a big smile. "More dreams, perhaps?"

"No." She shook her head. Today the silver blonde hair was done up in an attractive knot on top of her head. Not many women could wear their hair that way and still look alluring, he thought. "No

dreams," she went on, "just a feeling I have."

They both sat down and he leaned forward across his desk. "Please tell me."

"The Brantley baby," she said. "Have you found him yet?"

An eighteen-month-old boy had been stolen from his mother's grocery cart inside a supermarket while the mother was one aisle away, talking to the butcher. The few who had seen the redheaded woman pick the baby up and walk away with him had thought she was a relative because she had been standing beside the cart for a few minutes before the kidnapping. Those who saw her reported that there was nothing covert or unusual about the way she picked up the baby, cuddled and crooned to him, then walked away. It was three or four minutes before the mother returned to the cart and began screaming. Five days after the abduction there had been no calls, no demand for ransom.

"No, we haven't found him," Max said. "We have nothing but a description of the kidnapper, a big, redheaded woman who was dressed in a tan cloth coat." His smile increased as he looked at her. "Please tell me where we can find her . . . and the baby."

"I don't know," she said. "That is, I'm not sure. But every now and then I hear a baby crying when I know there's no baby anywhere near me. I realize the noise is in my head, but the strange thing is that it's louder in some locations than in others. I don't hear it at all now, but a few minutes ago as I drove down Clairmont Street, it was quite loud. Then it got fainter and fainter."

"You're sure it's just in your head?"

"Positive. I heard it early this morning. It stopped, then started again. Would you . . ." She broke off, hesitated, then said, "Would you think I was insane if I asked you to go with me outside to see if I can still hear the baby crying? I have this . . . this feeling that it's the Bradley baby."

There was only the slightest pause as a thought flashed across Max's mind: is this for real or am I being hoodwinked by a bona fide flake? But no, her smoothness, her style, her speech, everything about her indicated that she was a rational and sensible woman. "Tell you what," he said, "let's take my car and drive around a bit and see what happens."

Outside, she heard the crying faintly, but as they drove up McDowell Street, it diminished, then was gone. When

Max turned onto another street, the crying began again; he could tell by her sudden tensing even before she told him. "Keep going in this direction," she said. "It's getting louder."

At the city limits, Max slowed, and she said, "No, keep going. It's so loud now that it's deafening."

Max, of course, heard absolutely nothing but the noise of passing cars and his companion's now quick, raspy breathing. At an unpaved side road, she said, "Turn here," and a few minutes later said, "Stop the car. We're right at it, the crying baby."

They were in a woodsy area, but there were no roads turning off the one they were on, only a tiny footpath leading into the woods. She nodded toward the path and got out of the car. He followed, feeling like something of an idiot. But then all of a sudden, deep into the woods, he stopped and said, "My God! I hear it, too, now. I hear a baby crying."

In a tiny clearing, they came upon a little pen, crudely made out of chicken wire; over the top was a sheet of clear plastic. Inside the pen was a baby boy lying on his back, kicking his feet, crying lustily. Beside him was a half-filled bottle of milk. "Sweet Jesus!" Max murmured,

"you don't suppose he's been here all this time, do you?"

"I wouldn't think so," Sylvia Antonini said. "His clothes would be messier, and he'd be weak from hunger, if not half dead."

Max grabbed up the baby and said, "Hurry. I want to get some officers out here in case she comes back for him."

No one came back, however, and another APB for the red-headed woman proved as fruitless as the first had been.

About a week after that, Max called Mrs. Antonini and invited her to have dinner with him. He did it with some trepidation because he didn't want her to think he had anything in mind other than a pleasant dinner. He wanted to know her better, have some good conversation. He was not interested in romance or any kind of relationship except, possibly, friendship. But he didn't know how to get this across to her without flat-out saying so, which he was too much of a gentleman to do.

She seemed to realize the ground rules without being told, though, and the dinner went well. He took her to a country inn north of town noted for its superb cuisine. Conversation flowed easily between them (she was tremendously interested in his work, his

cases), and it wasn't until dessert that he got down to the nitty-gritty.

"I have to confess," he said, "that the first time you came to my office, I thought you were a fake."

She gave him a tentative smile, then broke out in her throaty laugh. "But, captain, I am a fake."

"You mean you don't really have ESP or some kind of sixth sense?"

"Oh no, that's not faked. But my name is. My real name is Jane Jones, not Sylvia Antonini."

"But why . . ."

"Some years after I realized I had this . . . call it power, I suppose . . . I decided to use it as a profession. Now tell me, Captain, how many people do you think would listen to anything a psychic named Jane Jones had to say? I realized after several dismal months that I'd have to have a different name, and I chose Antonini because it sounds foreign. When it comes to things cultural or intellectual, or even abstract and complex, Americans seem always to defer to Europeans. And Sylvia seemed to go well with Antonini, and certainly is a more interesting, exotic name than plain Jane. So you see," she paused briefly, smiling, "I am the fake you thought I was."

"Did business pick up?"

"You wouldn't believe it! And a slight accent didn't hurt, just a tiny accent to go with the name."

"What sort of things do people ask of you?" He was sincerely curious about the reasons that would send a person to a psychic. A practical, down-to-earth man, it would never occur to him to go to a seer.

"People come mainly about the two things that are considered the most important in life, love and money," she said, "and I think love has a slight edge over money. Can I make the one I love love me, will we ever marry, will he leave his wife for me? Those are the most frequently asked questions."

"Women's questions. Do men go to you as well?"

"Of course, though I have more women clients than men. Men inquire more about business deals than love—though there are some who come about matters of the heart."

"Can you see into the future?"

She hesitated. "I don't know. That's a hard question to answer. Occasionally, I think I can. But usually, what I see and feel is more in the nature of... call it ESP. As in the cases of the Brantley baby and Mrs. Landower."

When he took her to the door of her small house on the edge of town that night, he asked, half-seriously, "Am I going to have a good day tomorrow?"

"I certainly hope so," she said, then laughed as she thanked him for dinner and a pleasant evening.

Not long after that, he sent for her to ask her help on two cases: a series of break-ins in houses in an affluent part of town, and the murder of a man who had been walking home late at night from a store where he had been to buy cigarettes.

She had not come up with the solution to either case, but she had undeniably been of some help. She said that although all the break-ins had the same M.O., they were not all done by the same person or persons. She had been right: when the robbers were caught, they turned out to be two rival juvenile gangs. As for the murder, she said it was drug related, and she was right again, but she could come up with no leads that helped the police catch the murderer; that was something they did on their own. But give her her due, she had pointed them in the direction of the drug culture.

She came to Max's office on her own in connection with a jewel robbery at a shop in one of the malls. The manager re-

ported that during the lunch hour, while all but one clerk had gone to lunch, several people had come into the store. The clerk had been showing a woman some diamond ear clips while two other potential customers browsed. Apparently one of them had gone around behind a counter, or reached around, and pulled a set of jewels—matching necklace, bracelet, and earrings of emeralds and diamonds—out of the showcase and casually made off with it. It could have been either a woman with long black hair in a fake fur coat or a grayhaired man in a navy suit. No, the two were not together, at least the clerk didn't think so, and no, he had no idea which was the thief. He didn't even realize there had been a theft until he happened to glance toward that particular showcase and miss the square of black velvet on which the jewelry had been displayed.

Two days after the theft had been reported in the newspaper (a small item at the bottom of the obituary page), Sylvia Antonini was in Max's office. "I think I know where those stolen gems are," she told him. "They're in a hotel room. I can see some numbers, probably the numbers on the door, but I'm not sure of the sequence.

It's three one nine, or nine one three, or three nine one, or . . ."

"What hotel and where?" Max asked.

"I think here in town, but I don't know which hotel."

"There're only a hundred or so hotels and motels in town, but thanks," he said. "If we find them, I'll owe you another dinner."

Although the city was teeming with lodging places, actually only a few were called hotels. Max went himself to two of them, checked out the six possible rooms, and found nothing. It was at the third, in room 193, that he found the jewelry in a bureau drawer. The room had been rented three days ago, he was told, by a woman with long black hair, but no one had seen her since that first day. There were no clothes in the closet, no toiletries or cosmetics in the bathroom. Obviously, the woman had gone. But why had she left the jewels behind? Had she stolen other things from other stores, which she had taken with her, and simply forgotten these little goodies? Hardly the work of a professional. A search of other hotels and motels as well as shopping centers and malls did not turn up the woman with long black hair or anyone close to her description. But thanks to Mrs.

Antonini, the jeweler had his stolen merchandise back.

It was this last case that had caused Max to go through the files and take out every case in which Sylvia Antonini had assisted. He studied them for a long time, then sat in a deep study for an even longer time. Finally, he sent for the psychic, and as he waited now for her to come in, his fingers drummed rhythmically on the side of his desk.

"Sorry, captain," Sergeant Ray Forbes said, sticking his head in the door. "Mrs. Antonini's living room looks like a doctor's waiting room. People lined up to see her. She said to tell you she'd be here in about an hour."

Max nodded. "If she isn't, go back and tell her it's urgent."

But Sylvia Antonini was in his office in exactly an hour, sitting in the chair across from him, looking at him expectantly. "Some case you're having trouble with?"

"Yes, several. Mrs. Antonini . . ."

"Don't you think by now you could call me Sylvia?"

"Sylvia, then. I just happened to be going through some old files . . ." Happened to on purpose. ". . . and noticed in these cases in which you assisted, well, they've never been

closed. Nadine Landower: we found her but not the murderer. The Brantley baby: we found him but not the kidnaper. The jewelry store heist: we found the jewels but not the thief." He paused and looked at her.

She returned the look, her expression questioning. "Yes?"

"Since your . . . ESP, or whatever, seemed attuned in these particular cases, I was wondering if you could get it working again and help us close out these files."

She was quiet for a long time. Finally, she said, "I'm not sure what it is you want of me."

"If you can, I'd like for you to come up with something, some evidence, some clue, that would lead us to the perpetrators."

"I'll try," she said. "I can't promise anything, but I'll do the best I can."

As soon as she left the office, Max dialed Sergeant Forbes' extension. "Ray, Mrs. Antonini just left. I want you to follow her. Stick with her until your shift's over, then Tom Dansky will relieve you."

"What's up, captain?"

"Maybe nothing. But don't let her out of your sight—except, of course, when she's in her house."

Max stayed at the office later than usual, thinking he would hear from Forbes, but there

was no report of any kind. Near midnight he was patched through to Dansky, who was parked across the street from the Antonini house.

"I'm not sure what you want, captain," Dansky said, "but she's been inside ever since I came on shift. Several people have gone in, three women and a man, separately. I guess she's doing readings for them or something."

Max wasn't sure what he wanted either; his hunch might have been nothing more than bad guessing. After all, he didn't claim to be clairvoyant or have ESP.

When he went into his office at eight thirty the next morning, Dansky was sitting in front of the desk, coffee cup balanced precariously on the arm of the chair.

"You've got something," Max said, a statement rather than a question.

"I dunno." He held out a small flat gold case. Max took it and turned it over in his hands. A cigarette case. He opened it and saw the initials *E.V.* engraved inside.

"So?" He looked at Dansky.

"She left the house at five this morning, captain, and drove out of town to the Boy Scout hut. She walked around to the side of the hut, close to where the Landower woman

was found. She just stood there for a minute or two, then I saw her drop something and kick a few leaves over it. I later picked up what she'd dropped. It was this cigarette case."

"What did she do then?"

"She drove back to town, back to her house, and she was still there when Forbes took over."

Max held the case gingerly by the corner, careful not to ruin any fingerprints. "Tom, would you mind working another hour to two this morning? You'll get comp time plus the overtime. I want you to take this around to the jewelry stores in town and see who bought it. With engraved initials, it obviously came from a jeweler even though it's only gold-plated."

After Dansky left, Max sat at his desk drinking coffee and waiting for the call he was sure would come. The phone did not ring, however. Dansky was back in two hours looking victorious but puzzled. "I found the store," he said. "Martin's Jewelers on Avondale. The case was sold to Ernest Vickery. Martin didn't even have to look it up; he knows Vickery. Good friends, apparently."

"That's a break," Max said. "Now let's see if we can get Vickery in here."

It took two phone calls, the first to the home address of Ernest P. Vickery, the second to his office after Mrs. Vickery gave them the number.

Vickery, a slight, balding man in his early fifties, came to the station at once, his face showing both worry and bewilderment. "What is it, what is it?" he said on entering Max's office.

"Sit down, Mr. Vickery," Max said. "Coffee?"

"No, no, just tell me . . ." And then he stopped as though out of breath.

Max pulled the cigarette case out of his drawer and put it on the desk. Vickery looked at it and then at Max. "What, what?"

"Is this yours?"

He picked up the case, opened it, and nodded. "It was."

"What do you mean, was?"

"I quit smoking two and a half years ago, and I got rid of everything I had that would remind me I ever smoked at all. Cigarettes, a lighter, this case, everything. Where'd you find it?"

"Where'd you get rid of it?" Max countered.

It didn't even take a moment's thought. "I went to this psychic here in town—I had a deal hanging fire and my wife told me this woman was a wonder in advising people what to

do—and while I was there, the psychic said I seemed predisposed toward cancer. She said I should stop smoking, and the way she said it scared me so bad that I threw my cigarettes, lighter, and case in her wastebasket." He had been staring down at his hands but now he looked up at Max. "What is this all about? Why are you making a big to-do over a discarded cigarette case?"

"We found it and thought the owner might want it back," Max said smoothly. "Obviously you don't, so I'll just keep it."

"Keep it and welcome. Can I go now?"

After Vickery had gone, Max continued to look at the case. From time to time, he looked at the phone, but still the call he expected did not come.

Instead, she came in person just as Max was getting ready to leave for the day. The silver-blond hair hung loose about her shoulders, held back from her face by a pale blue bandeau. She wore designer jeans and a blue and green plaid shirt. "Please excuse the way I look." She greeted him with an apology. "I was working in my garden when I saw it."

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Antonini. Saw what?" Max half rose from his chair, pointed her to a chair, then sat down again.

"Sylvia, please." She flashed that hundred-watt smile that was so attractive. "I'm not exactly sure what I saw. My mind was on what you asked me to do—you know, concentrate on the perpetrators—and I visualized myself at that cabin beside the flagpole. I looked around—in my mind, of course—and I saw something glittering on the ground near where you found Mrs. Landower. Something gold, shining in the fading sunlight, partially covered by leaves. Then my mind seemed to blot that out, for some reason, and the letters of the alphabet were in front of me, lined up as they would be in a child's primer, with the letter V in bold type." She paused, looking at him with those liquid brown eyes. "I'm not sure what it all means, or what it was I saw, but it might have some bearing on the murderer."

Max smiled, opened his desk drawer, took out the gold cigarette case, and laid it on the desk. "Is this what you saw in your, er, vision?"

She stared at the case, her eyes becoming rounder. She opened her mouth as though she was about to speak, then closed her mouth again. Finally, she said, "I—I can't be sure. Where did you get it?"

"Exactly where you left it, Mrs. Antonini. One of my men picked it up about not long after you dropped it beside the place where we found Mrs. Landower."

He waited for her to say something, but she was silent. The color had left her face, and Max noticed that her hands, clutching the arms of her chair, were trembling slightly.

"Why did you kill Nadine Landower?" He asked the question as casually as though he were asking what she'd had for lunch.

"No! No! I didn't kill her. I've never harmed anyone in my life."

"No? I suppose it wouldn't have harmed Ernest Vickery if he'd taken the rap for something you did?"

"You don't understand!" Her voice quivered on the edge of hysteria. "It wasn't like that at all. Nadine Landower wasn't murdered. She just . . . died."

"Tell me about it."

There was another long silence while she studied the floor. Then she looked at Max as though trying to read his mind. Finally, she said, "Nadine was a client of mine. She started coming to me right after her husband died. I was the medium through which she made contact with him and . . ."

"Wait a minute!" Max leaned over his desk. "Her dead husband spoke to her?"

"He spoke to her through me. Sometimes I couldn't reach him, but most of the time I could. It was her husband who suggested that she run for mayor." She paused.

"Go on," Max said.

"That last morning when she came . . . it was early, before nine o'clock . . . her husband told her, through me, that running for mayor was no longer a good idea, that she would be defeated by another candidate, the last one who entered the race. Nadine clutched her chest and said, 'But Henry, I've spent everything, all my savings, everything, on this campaign.' But Henry kept insisting it was not the right thing for her to do, that circumstances had changed since he told her to run, and that she shouldn't waste any more money that way. Nadine stood up, then fell to the floor. Heart attack. I think she was dead before she even hit the floor. I started to call 911, but I decided not to."

"Why?"

"Because Henry's presence was still there and he told me not to do it. He said, 'Sylvia, this is your chance to make yourself better known so you can help more people,' and he

told me what to do to bring this about."

"Which was," Max said, "to bury her in a shallow grave, then go to the police and impress them with your psychic powers."

"I figured if I could be well known, like Jeane Dixon is, I could help more people."

"And make more money," Max murmured, then was silent for a moment while he ruminated over what she had said. Because Mrs. Landower's body had been badly decomposed, the medical examiner had not been able to determine cause of death, so they had assumed strangulation. It was entirely possible that it had been a heart attack.

"And the Brantley baby," he said. "I think a search of your house would reveal a red wig . . . unless you got rid of it."

She looked down at the floor again. "Yes, I took the baby, but I certainly didn't harm him. I kept him at my house for four days. I only put him in the woods right before I went for you. He couldn't have been out there more than thirty minutes."

"And, of course, you were the woman with long black hair who stole the jewelry and left it in the hotel room."

She nodded. "But I didn't really steal it, because I told you

where it was. I never had any intention of keeping it."

"Mrs. Antonini, you have the right to remain silent . . ." Max began Mirandizing her while she stared at him, mouth agape in surprise.

"But I don't understand," she said when he finished. "Am I under arrest?"

"You are indeed."

"What could you possibly charge me with? I haven't hurt anybody."

"For starters, you're charged with concealing a body, making false reports to the police, kidnapping, and grand theft." He picked up the phone and asked for officers to come to his office.

She still stared at him unbelievably. "How did you guess?" she asked, her voice almost a whisper. "How did you find out about Nadine and the others?"

"I looked back through the cases you were involved with," he told her. "I thought if you were really psychic, if all that knowledge came to you through some sixth sense, then you should have been able to solve the case completely, giving at least a hint about the

perpetrators. Also, you had information on only the cases you came to me about, not the ones on which I called you in. On those, you could only guess."

Two officers entered the room and looked from Max to Sylvia Antonini, then back to Max again as though not sure why they had been summoned.

"Take her downstairs and book her," Max said, listing the charges again for the officers.

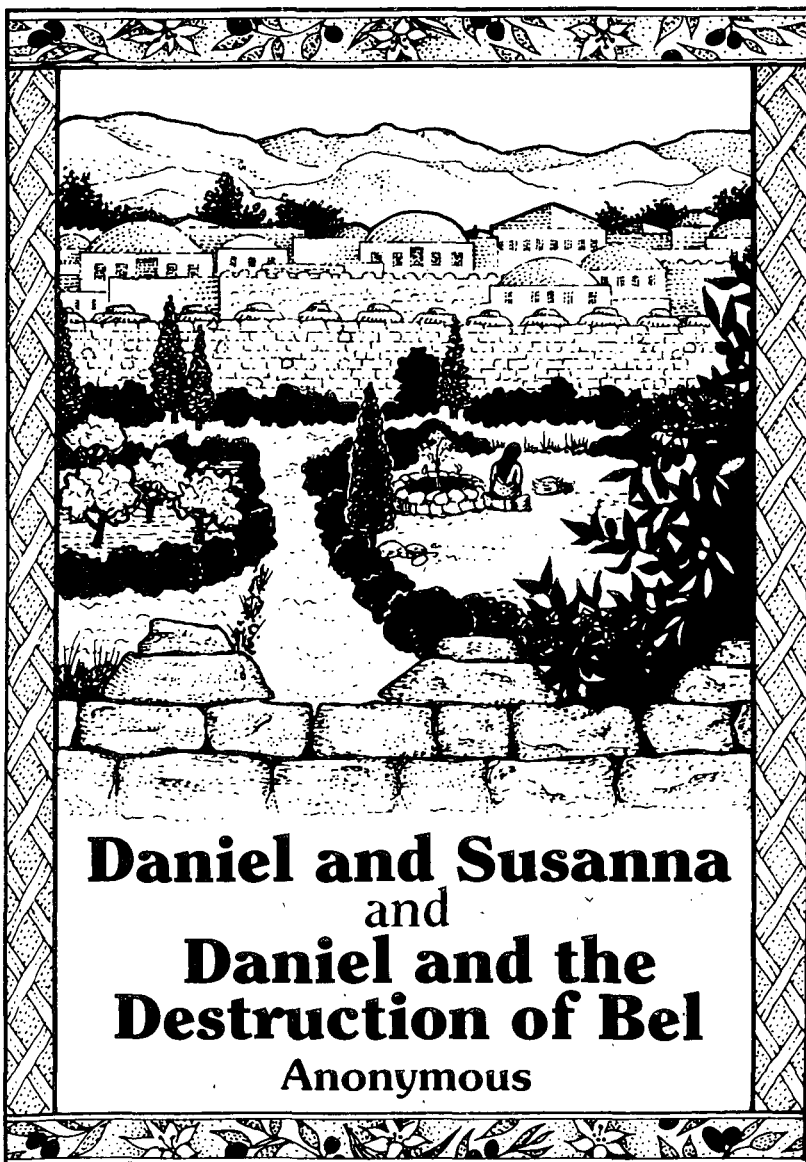
Going out of the room with a policeman on either side, she turned for one last word to Max. "You're going to regret this, captain."

For the first time that day, Max laughed. "I'm afraid your predictions don't carry much weight around here any more, Mrs. Antonini." He continued smiling until the door closed behind them, then his expression was sober again.

She was an attractive, intelligent, fascinating woman, but he had to admit, to himself at least, that his first impression of her had been the correct one.

In the future, he would pay more attention to first impressions.

MYSTERY CLASSIC



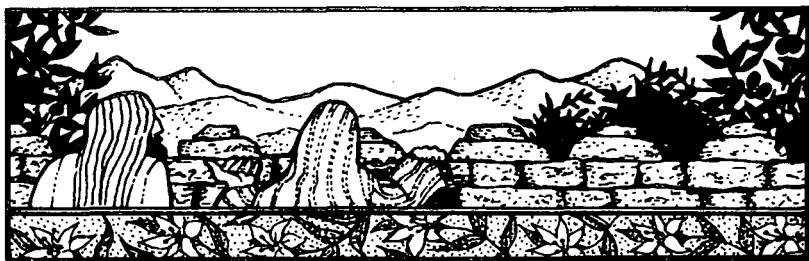
Daniel and Susanna
and
**Daniel and the
Destruction of Bel**
Anonymous

Illustration by Laurie Davis

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Edgar Allan Poe notwithstanding (no disrespect meant, of course), the detective story goes back a long way, a very long way. Among the earliest examples of it are the following accounts, dating from the second or first century B.C. Both of these tales are about Daniel—the Daniel of the lions' den—and are additions to the book of Daniel in the Apocrypha (a collection of early Jewish writings sometimes included as a separate section in the Bible but not regarded by Jewish or Protestant scholars as canonical).

The translation below, from The Oxford Study Bible, is accompanied by a number of footnotes, which we have not reproduced here. It is perhaps interesting to know, however, that the name Susanna means lily; that the plays on the words clove (tree) and cleave, yew and hew, reflect similar wordplays in the Greek text; that Cyrus the Persian defeated King Astyages about 550 B.C.; that Bel, known also as Marduk, was the principal Babylonian god.—ED.



DANIEL AND SUSANNA

In Babylon there lived a man named Joakim, who had married Susanna daughter of Hilkiyah, a very beautiful and devout woman. Her parents were godfearing people who had brought up their daughter according to the law of Moses. Joakim was very rich, and his house had adjoining it a fine garden; this was a regular meeting-place for the Jews, because he was the man of greatest distinction among them.

Now that year the judges appointed were two of the community's elders; of such the Lord had said, "Wickedness came forth from Babylon, from elders who were judges and were supposed to guide my people." These men were constantly at Joakim's house, and everyone who had a case to be tried came to them there.

At noon, when the people went away, Susanna would go and walk in her husband's garden. Every day the two elders used to see her entering the garden for her walk, and they were inflamed with lust. Their minds were perverted; their thoughts went astray and were no longer turned to God, and they did not keep in mind the demands of justice.

Both were infatuated with her; but they did not disclose to each other what torments they suffered, because they were ashamed to confess they wanted to seduce her. Day after day they watched eagerly for a sight of her.

One day, having said, "Let us go home; it is time to eat," they left and went off in different directions; but turning back they found themselves face to face, and on questioning each other about this, they admitted their passion. Then they agreed on a time when they might find her alone.

While they were watching for an opportune moment, Susanna went into the garden as usual, accompanied only by her two maids; it was very hot, and she felt a desire to bathe in the garden. No one else was there apart from the two elders, who had hidden and were spying on her. She said to the maids, "Bring me olive oil and unguents, and shut the garden doors so that I may bathe." They did as she said: they made fast the garden doors and went out by the side entrance for the things they had been told to bring; they did not see the elders, because they were in hiding.

As soon as the maids had gone, the two elders got up and ran to Susanna. "Look, the garden doors are shut," they said, "and no one can see us! We are overcome with desire for you; consent, and yield to us. If you refuse, we shall swear in evidence there was a young man with you and that was why you sent your maids away." Susanna groaned and said: "It is a desperate plight I am in! If I do this, the penalty is death; if I do not, you will have me at your mercy. My choice is made: I will not do it! Better to be at your mercy than to sin against the Lord!" With that she called out at the top of her voice, but the two elders shouted her down, and one of them ran and opened the garden door.

The household, hearing the uproar in the garden, rushed in through the side entrance to see what had happened to her. When the elders had told their story, the servants were deeply shocked, for no such allegation had ever been made against Susanna.

Next day, when the people gathered at her husband Joakim's house, the two elders arrived, intent on their criminal design to

have Susanna put to death. In the presence of the people they said, "Send for Susanna daughter of Hilkiah, Joakim's wife." She was summoned, and came with her parents and children and all her relatives. Now Susanna was a woman of great beauty and delicate feeling. She was closely veiled, but those scoundrels ordered her to be unveiled so that they might feast their eyes on her beauty.

Her family and all who saw her were in tears.

Then the two elders stood up before the people and put their hands on her head, she meanwhile looking towards heaven through her tears, for her trust was in the Lord. The elders said: "As we were walking by ourselves in the garden, this woman came in with her two maids and then a young man, who had been in hiding, came and lay with her. We were in a corner of the garden, and when we saw this wickedness we ran towards them. We saw them in the act, but we could not hold the man; he was too strong for us, he opened the door and got clean away. We seized the woman and asked who the young man was, but she would not tell us. That is our evidence."

Because they were elders of the people and judges, the assembly believed them and condemned her to death. Then raising her voice Susanna cried: "Eternal God, you know that their evidence against me is false. And now I am to die, innocent though I am of the charges these wicked men have brought against me."

The Lord heard her cry, and as she was being led off to execution, God inspired a devout young man named Daniel to protest. He shouted out, "I will not have this woman's blood on my hands." At this the people all turned towards him and demanded, "What do you mean?" He stepped forward and said: "Are you such fools, you Israelites, as to condemn a woman of Israel, without making careful enquiry and finding out the truth? Reopen the trial; the evidence these men have given against her is false."

Everyone hurried back, and the rest of the elders said to Daniel, "Come, take your place among us and state your case, for God has given you the standing of an elder." He said, "Separate these men and keep them at a distance from each other, and I shall examine them." When they had been separated, Daniel summoned one of them. "You hardened reprobate," he began, "the sins of your past have now come home to you. You have given unjust decisions, condemning the innocent and acquitting the guilty, although the Lord has said, 'You must not cause the death of the innocent and guiltless.' Now, if you really saw this woman, then tell us, under

what tree did you see them together?" He answered, "Under a clove tree." Daniel retorted, "Very good! This lie has cost you your life, for already God's angel has received your sentence from God, and he will cleave you in two." He ordered him to stand aside, and told them to bring forward the other.

He said to him: "Spawn of Canaan, no son of Judah, beauty has been your undoing and lust has perverted your heart! So this is how the two of you have been treating the women of Israel, terrifying them into yielding to you! But here is a woman of Judah who would not submit to your villainy. Now tell me, under what tree did you surprise them together?" "Under a yew tree," he replied. Daniel said to him, "Very good! This lie has cost you also your life, for the angel of God is waiting sword in hand to hew you down and destroy the pair of you."

At that the whole assembly shouted aloud, praising God, the Saviour of those who trust him. They turned on the two elders, for out of their own mouths Daniel had convicted them of giving false evidence: they dealt with them according to the law of Moses, putting them to death as they in their wickedness had intended to do to their neighbour. So an innocent life was saved that day. Then Hilkiyah and his wife gave praise for their daughter Susanna, as did also her husband Joakim and all her relatives, because she was found innocent of a shameful deed.

From that day forward Daniel was held in great esteem among the people.



DANIEL AND THE DESTRUCTION OF BEL

When King Astyages was gathered to his forefathers, he was succeeded on the throne by Cyrus the Persian. Daniel was a companion of the king and the most honoured of all the king's Friends.

The Babylonians had an idol called Bel, for which every day they provided twelve bushels of fine flour, forty sheep, and fifty gallons of wine. The king went daily to bow down to it in worship; but Daniel bowed before his own God. When the king asked him, "Why do you not bow down to Bel?" he replied, "Because I do not worship man-made idols, I worship the living God who created heaven and earth and is sovereign over all mankind." The king protested, "How can you think Bel is not a living god? Do you not see how much he eats and drinks each day?" Daniel laughed. "Do not be deceived, your majesty," he said; "this Bel of yours is just clay inside and bronze outside, and has never eaten or drunk anything."

Angered by this, the king summoned the priests of Bel and said to them, "If you cannot tell me who is it that consumes these provisions, you shall die, but if you can show it is Bel that eats them, then, for blasphemy against Bel, Daniel shall die." Daniel said to the king, "Let it be as you propose." (There were seventy priests of Bel, and in addition their wives and children.) When the king, along with Daniel, went into the temple of Bel, the priests said, "We are now leaving; let your majesty set out the food yourself, with the wine you have mixed; then make fast the door and seal it with your signet. In the morning when you return, if you do not find that Bel has eaten it all, let us be put to death; but if Daniel's charges against us turn out to be false, then let him die." They treated the affair lightly, for beneath the table they had constructed a hidden entrance, by which they used to go in and eat up everything.

After the priests had gone, the king set out the food for Bel; and Daniel ordered his servants to bring ashes and sift them over the whole temple with only the king present. They then left the building, closed the door, sealed it with the royal signet, and went away. During the night the priests, with their wives and children, came as usual and ate and drank everything.

Next morning the king was up early, and Daniel with him. The king said, "Are the seals intact, Daniel?" "They are intact, your majesty," he answered. As soon as the door was opened, the king took one look at the table and cried aloud, "Great are you, O Bel! In you there is no deception whatsoever." But Daniel laughed and held back the king from going in. "Just look at the floor," he said, "and judge whose footprints these are." The king said, "I see the footprints of men, women, and children." In a rage, he had the priests arrested together with their wives and children, and they

showed him the secret door through which it was their custom to go and eat what was on the table. The king then put them to death, and he handed Bel over to Daniel, who destroyed both idol and temple.

SOLUTION TO THE JULY "UNSOLVED":

Della O'Dell killed George Robinson.

SEAT	MAN	WIFE	PROFESSION	HOME
1	Henry Parker	Ellen	carpenter	Utah
2	John McCoy	Celia	architect	Texas
3	Karl Queen	Angela	farmer	Tennessee
4	Isaac Newman	Florence	doctor	Virginia
5	George Robinson	Beatrice	banker	South Carolina
6	Larry O'Dell	Della	executive	West Virginia

BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon



Combine the romance and period detail of a Regency novel with the plot of a mystery featuring an amateur detective, and you have Kate Ross's **A Broken Vessel** (Viking, \$18.95). This is the second novel to star Julian Kestrel, an 1820's dandy with a flair for crime who's aided and abetted by a very useful valet named Dipper. (Julian and his valet met when the latter made an unsuccessful attempt to pick Julian's pocket.) Under the supervision of an estimable landlady, their domicile is reminiscent of the masculine enclaves of Holmes and Watson or Lord Peter and Bunter until Sally shows up. Sally is Dipper's sister, a bright and engaging young "gel" who's been part of the world's oldest profession since her early teens. As a lark, Sally always helps herself to her client's handkerchief. One night her third client beats her so badly she barely escapes with her life. Dipper spots her and brings her home to recover. That's when the trio find an urgent letter, written by a distraught lady, folded into one of the handkerchiefs. Who is the lady? And which is the client? Anne Perry fans should appreciate Ross's deft mix of history, humor, romance, and mystery.

Bernie Rhodenbarr is back and in fine fettle. Lawrence Block's amiable but often hapless burglar has been trying to give up the game when **The Burglar Who Traded Ted Williams** (Dutton, \$19.95) opens. He loves his Greenwich Village used-books store, which is close to his chum Carolyn's pet grooming business and thus handy for shared lunches and after-work drinks. Business is okay, and Bernie even has a new employee. All right, so it's a cat,

but it's a working cat, a serious guard cat. But Bernie is getting a bit bored with the good life, with the straight and narrow. Famous last words. In no time he saves a beautiful young woman, breaks and enters to find a corpse, is abused by a rude customer, is threatened by his landlord with the loss of his livelihood, is subsequently *hired* by his landlord to burglarize another apartment, and is thrown in jail (not necessarily in that order). Along the way Bernie learns a great deal about the business of collectible baseball cards, and darn little about the opposite sex. But his survival instincts, combined with his irrepressible sense of humor, make Bernie Rhodenbarr one of detective fiction's truly singular heroes.

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's great fictional detective has proved to be one of literature's most enduring (if not always endearing) characters. It's 1915, and readers can find Sherlock Holmes apparently living a quiet country existence in Sussex where he's retired to raise bees. Enter the title character of Laurie R. King's **The Beekeeper's Apprentice** (St. Martin's, \$21.95), a teenager named Mary Russell. Mentally precocious, independent, and tomboyish, Mary is stoically enduring a lonely orphan's life with a very disagreeable aunt. Sharing uncompromising intelligence, a fierce thirst for knowledge, and a relentless drive to slake that thirst, Holmes and Mary were destined to meet. When they do, the chemistry is immediate. The ensuing partnership is nothing less than magic. Holmes begins tutoring the lonely girl, not suspecting that he will one day require all of Mary's wit and strength to foil an arch-enemy bent on his destruction. King paints this portrait of a timeless relationship with delicate subtlety and very sophisticated psychology. Best of all, she adds a terrifically twisty plot, heart-stopping action, fine period details, witty dialogue, and truly memorable characters.

Strong writing and sympathetic, credible characters mark the work of William G. Tapply. Both are showcased in **The Snake Eater** (Otto Penzler Books, \$20), the latest novel featuring Brady Coyne, a Boston attorney in private practice. A friend asks Coyne to defend Daniel McCloud, a Vietnam vet who suffers severely from Agent Orange poisoning, on a narcotics charge. McCloud freely admits that he grows and uses marijuana, the only pain-killer he's found that works for him. He's been arrested for possession by a local cop who just happens to lust after his lover. Tapply quickly turns up the burner with a series of violent murders, a terrifying opening move in a game of guerrilla tactics, and a shocking twist ending.

Michelle Spring's heroine Laura Principal joins the thin ranks of British female private eyes in a case that quite literally strikes close to home. And **Every Breath You Take** (Pocket, \$20) proves that home is too close for comfort. Laura and her old friend Helen inherited a small country place. Since then, Wildfell Cottage has been their safe haven, a quiet retreat from their separately busy Cambridge lives. When they interview Monica, a Cambridge art teacher looking for a weekend studio, Helen and Monica instantly click, though Laura has reservations. She can provide no substantial argument against the arrangement, however, and the deal has been happily closed when a vicious Cambridge murder threatens to banish forever peace of mind at Wildfell. Laura ignores the advice of her lover/partner and initiates her own private investigation. As she unravels the twisted threads—an unrequited lover turned stalker, tragic proof of long-time sexual harassment and obsession, and one woman's struggle to achieve independence and self-respect—this reader was left with only admiration for Laura Principal. She is definitely in the right job.

Murder in the Place of Anubis by Lynda S. Robinson (Walker, \$18.95) introduces a sympathetic ancient Egyptian sleuth. Lord Meren is Friend of the King, the eyes and ears of the boy Tutankhamun. This novel, the first in a series, should appeal to fans of Ellis Peters' Brother Cadfael books. Like Cadfael, Meren is a mature man of experience, with vast and varied knowledge. His past hardships and his military training have given him both wisdom and authority. And surely the domestic, political, and religious details of early Egyptian life are as mysterious to the average reader as the life of a medieval abbey. Robinson builds her tale on conventional murder mystery lines and then paints the background in with rich and colorful details.

NOTE: In the April issue, we inadvertently left out Susan Wittig Albert's name; she is the author of *Witches' Bane*. Our apologies.—ED.

MURDER BY DIRECTION

by William Heller



It has been eighteen years since Hitchcock's final film, *Family Plot*, and fourteen years since his death at age eighty-one. So how is it that there are two new Hitchcock releases on the market?

The films in question are the long-shelved result of Hitchcock's work to support the war effort against Nazi Germany.

Bon Voyage and **Adventure Malgache** were made fifty years ago for the British Ministry of Information. They were intended to be shown in France, after the liberation, and have not been shown in the United States until recently. But the British government decided the films were not quite what it had in mind and pulled them from circulation. Now the two are available on one videotape and are a must-see for Hitchcock fans.

The twenty-six and thirty-

one minute films, from 1944, are rarely seen examples of Hitchcock in his prime. Sandwiched between *Shadow of a Doubt* and *Lifeboat*, *Spellbound* and *Notorious*, these low budget works are far from those polished Hollywood features. But the gritty, dark production gives the films an added air of urgency.

Bon Voyage is the story of a Scottish Royal Air Force gunner who has escaped from a German prison camp. The film opens with his debriefing in Britain by a Free French intelligence officer. We're told the brave tale in flashback form and see just how the RAF man and his Polish fellow escapee make their way across occupied France with the help of an underground network.

But it is only when his story ends that we discover the *real* story behind the escape. The

fellow escapee, it turns out, is a Gestapo agent whose mission is to uncover as many resistance agents as he can. Then we see the same escape story again, only this time we see it from a different point of view, knowing that one man is a Nazi spy.

So, instead of a simple story of a heroic resistance movement, we wind up with a tale of deceit in which we cannot be sure whom to trust. As is typical of Hitchcock, we learn that people are not always what they seem to be.

It's this type of ambiguity that caused the British government to put Hitchcock's "propaganda" films away, although the ambiguity certainly makes them more interesting.

Adventure Malgache begins in the backstage dressing room of a theater group where some actors are discussing their roles in the production they are about to stage. One of the actors is a lawyer from French Madagascar who wound up in prison for organizing an underground railroad for the resistance there.

This story, which is less dark and makes use of humor, also works with flashbacks, during which the lawyer/actor tells his fellow actors how he was discovered, how he managed to avoid execution, and how he finally managed to escape his sentence to a harsh penal col-

ony. Here, the enemy—those who support the Vichy regime—is portrayed as buffoonish, whereas the enemy in *Bon Voyage* is much more sinister.

For example, the Madagascar police chief and nemesis of the hero lawyer/actor, tosses his Vichy water and puts a picture of Queen Victoria on his office wall when word comes of the British defeat of pro-Nazi forces on his island.

Both films, which are in French with English subtitles, make use of exiled French actors, along with French writers and technicians. Their names are not revealed in the credits, as many of them had families who remained in occupied France.

What the British Ministry of Information was expecting from Hitchcock is anybody's guess, but it's ironic that they chose to mothball the "propaganda" films of their greatest and best-known filmmaker. As a big name, he certainly could have helped the cause.

The special fiftieth anniversary video release of Hitchcock's lost World War II films comes from New York-based Milestone Film & Video. For further information, call (212) 865-7449.

Finally, don't strain too hard looking for a Hitchcock cameo in either film. He stayed behind the camera for these two.

THE STORY THAT WON

The March Mysterious Photo-
Sherrie Brown of Cambria,
tions go to Julie DeGroat of
Jane LeMan of Los Angeles,



Tulsa, Oklahoma; Art Cosing of Fairfax, Virginia; Leah Suslovich of Brooklyn, New York; John L. Reilly of Clearwater, Florida; Jean Groscup of Glen Arm, Maryland; Marilyn Bojanowski of Chicago, Illinois; Wanda C. Keeseey of Highspire, Pennsylvania; Josephine Gonzales of Scarborough, Ontario, Canada; Lorenia Moore of Highland Heights, Kentucky; and Marjorie Newton of Minerva, Ohio.

tograph contest was won by
California. Honorable men-
Theresa, New York; Leslie
California; Ann L. Bruns of

REST IN PEACE by Sherrie Brown

"Ah, peace and quiet," Detective Setler said, biting into his sandwich. His partner was unwrapping his lunch.

"This is the only quiet place in town since the murders," Danvito agreed, looking out the car window at the abandoned and overgrown cemetery. "Nobody here asking us when we're going to solve the crimes. Wish we could find just one of the darned bodies. Where could someone be hiding bodies in a small town?"

"Beats me," Setler said. "I can't even figure out why anyone would kill Mrs. Rand. Everyone loved her, even animals. Remember how her cat used to follow her around everywhere?"

"Yep," Danvito agreed, "although her husband said it was because she carried lots of catnip in her pockets."

Setler wasn't really listening. "Hey, there's that cat of hers. Good thing cats can't talk, *he'd* be asking us why we haven't solved the murders. What's he want in the old cemetery?"

"Mice," Danvito said. "Mice in that grass." They watched as the cat disappeared in the tall grass to reappear on top of a weather-beaten gravestone. The cat meowed, kneading its paws on the granite before hunkering miserably down on top of the stone.

"Stupid cat," Setler said, "he won't catch any mice that way. Well, I'm done with my lunch. Let's get back to town and see what we can come up with on these murders. I can't think out here, it's too quiet."

"Cemeteries usually are," his partner said, starting the car and driving away.

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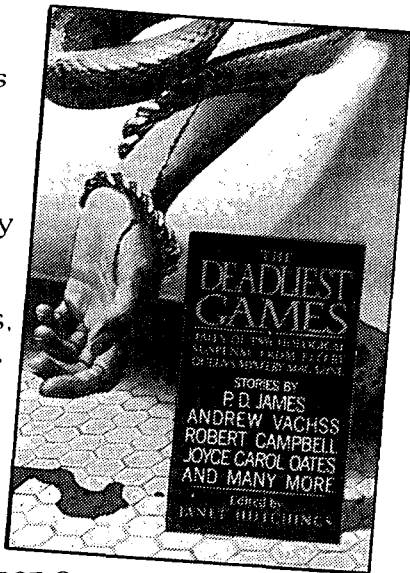
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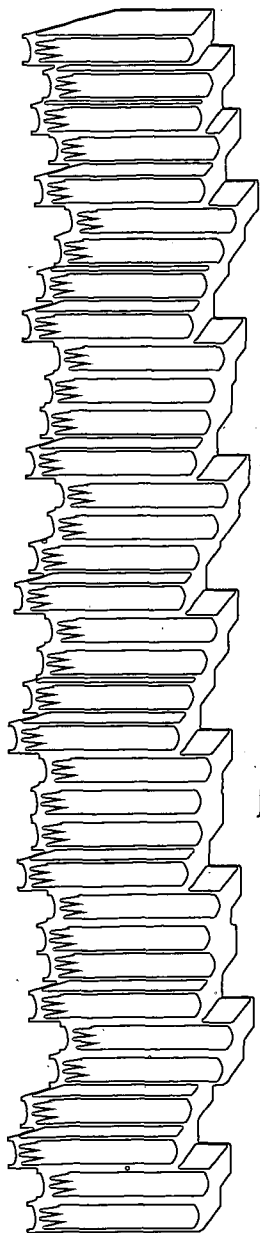
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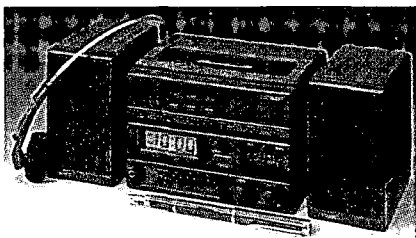
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